Christine Arnothy

Those Who Wait

BY THE AUTHOR OF

I am fifteen and I do not want to die

Translated by ANTONIA WHITE

CHRISTINE ARNOTHY's previous book, *I am Fifteen and I do not Want to Die* was acclaimed on its publication as one of the most remarkable pieces of autobiography for years. For her first novel she has chosen to describe the plight of a group of Hungarians, living in Budapest and in the Hungarian countryside, under a Communist régime, in the years following the end of the second world war. Around the predicament of Janos, a musician who holds an important post as conductor under the new régime but who has compromised himself earlier and lives in terror of discovery, the author builds up a complex, closely-integrated picture of what a totalitarian régime means in terms of ordinary, unknown people who would like to be happy. As well as being an absorbing and unusual novel of character and situation, *Those Who Wait* is a valuable documentary which lends it a particular interest.

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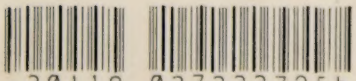

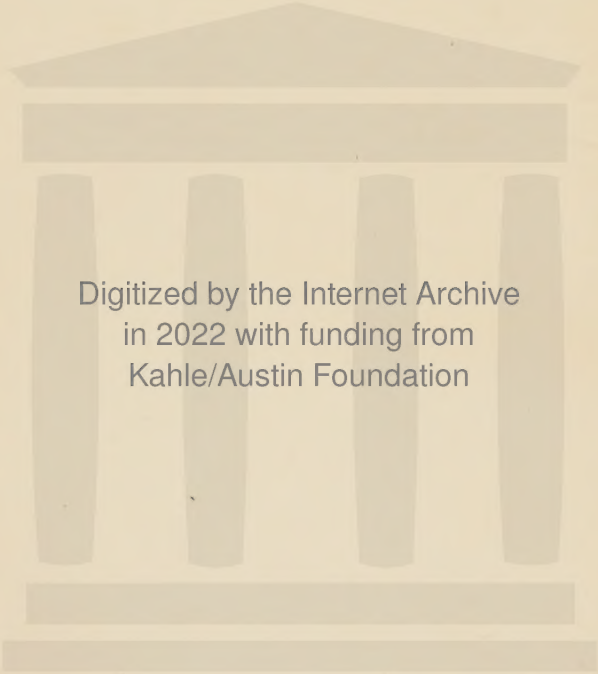

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I am Fifteen and I do not Want to Die

Christine Arnothy

THOSE WHO WAIT

Translated by

ANTONIA WHITE

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COLLINS
ST JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON
1957

To
Claude Bellanger

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1

BABY WOKE up yawning, as she always did. She began to yawn long before she so much as half-opened one eye, as if to prove how tired she still was and to proclaim her right to a few more hours of peace and darkness.

Nevertheless, the sun was shining so brilliantly outside that the light penetrated even through the heavy velvet curtains drawn across the window. The room was stiflingly hot.

Nor did the walls succeed in shutting out sounds. Somewhere —depressing reminder of real life—a bath was being run.

"It sounds like a cavalry charge," thought Baby, huddling up again under her blankets. But she promptly stretched herself out straight again, remembering that she had a neck to be preserved from wrinkles. The cavalry charge went on remorselessly and, in addition, the front-door bell began to peal loudly.

"It's the milkman," the young woman thought with weary distaste. She grabbed a cigarette from her bedside table and, leaning on one elbow, applied her lighter to it. A wardrobe with a triple mirror threw back her reflection. Her intimacy with those other selves gave her a peculiar feeling; her eyes greedily devoured the slightest gesture of that twin sister. She had already noticed the golden shimmer in her hair when she had bent over the lighter. Now she studied her hand with its long, well-manicured fingers, as it lay on the blanket like a carelessly flung glove. The shoulder, liberally displayed by her nightdress, was a trifle bony. Seized with sudden anxiety, the young woman plunged her hand down the opening, like a schoolgirl fishing up

the holy medal she wears on a little chain. "It's all right, it's still firm," she reassured herself, pulling up her right breast. She stretched herself and pushed the tip of one foot out of the sheets, as cautiously as if she were stepping into an icy bath. "Ah! The varnish of the little toe is chipped. The others are all right."

Someone knocked at the door.

"Baby . . . ? Baby . . . ?"

It was the falsely hearty voice of her mother-in-law.

"There's a letter for you . . . Baby, are you asleep?"

Baby did not reply. It was one of her tricks to annoy the old woman. She was furious. How many times had she told the concierge to keep her letters in his lodge so that she could collect them herself? Her mother-in-law's curiosity amounted to a disease. She fumbled the letters, balanced them on her hand as if she could guess their contents by their weight, and carefully studied the address of the sender. She even learnt by heart the words scrawled on postcards to make sure whether her son and her daughter-in-law had faithfully transmitted any part of the message that might be intended for herself. At such times her expression would alternate between rapture and severe disapproval. Occasionally, rather amusingly, she would put on the wrong expression.

Baby regarded it as an outrage that she had to go through her mother-in-law's room to get to the bathroom. Fresh from sleep, her hypersensitive sense of smell revolted as she passed through the room that stank like a ferret's hole. The old woman had suffered severely from hunger during the siege; ever since then she had never lost the mania for hoarding the smallest scraps of food. She regularly filched a few pieces of sugar from the breakfast table and kept two little bags of flour under her pillow. On the window-seat there was nearly always a little saucepan with the remains of a stew swimming in its stone-cold gravy. The linen cupboard served as a private larder, harbouring bits of cheese, onions, half a lemon and various other provisions. This produced a range of smells that was anything but delicate. They had tried in vain to explain to the old woman that the next war would decide people's

fate in a few days and that the atomic bomb would eliminate all food problems. She did not believe a word of it, and continued to glean anything eatable from here, there and everywhere. As a result, her figure became visibly plumper every day.

Baby meticulously stubbed out her cigarette and strained her ears. A door had just banged; that must undoubtedly be her husband, Janos, coming out of the bathroom. He called out to her.

"Now it's his turn to bother me," grumbled the young woman, stretching.

The resonant, slightly guttural voice rang out again:

"Baby, come along this minute and have your breakfast!"

"I'm still half-asleep," she protested vainly.

"You can rest this afternoon—come along now."

She realised the decisive moment had come; she would have to tear herself from her warm, soft bed. She put on her dressing-gown, pulled on her slippers, and dabbed a little scent on her nostrils so as to make the atmosphere of the room next door slightly more bearable to breathe.

As she entered listlessly, her mother-in-law held out a letter to her.

"I knocked at your door to give it to you, but I suppose you were asleep."

"Who's the letter from?"

"How should I know?" retorted the old woman, looking sublimely indifferent. "I only read the address and then I saw it wasn't for me."

The young woman slipped the letter in the pocket of her dressing-gown. She was too short-sighted to read it without her spectacles.

"What are you two dawdling about like that for?" Janos exclaimed irritably from the neighbouring room. "Mamma! Mamma! I'm waiting for you!"

The conductor was already at table. His thick hair, just greying at the temples, was still damp from his bath. He was rather a handsome man with his straight nose, his somewhat fleshy but

well-modelled lips and his round, close-shaven chin. But what leapt to the eye was the nape of his bull neck, bright scarlet even at this early hour, as if his blood were pumped through his veins from there and not from his heart. As a baby, he must have been highly photogenic, lying flat on his stomach on a cushion. With the years, his body had inflated like a rising loaf. A tide of flabby, pasty flesh had completely submerged his powerful frame. In evening dress, under the blinding glare of the arc-lamps, he made an imposing figure at his conductor's desk. In the morning, at breakfast, he was a somewhat depressing sight.

Baby bent over the teapot from which rose a scented steam. For her, the morning cup of tea was the occasion of a religious ceremony whose rites she performed meticulously. The others took coffee—real coffee, a dizzily expensive commodity that often came into the country in so-called gift parcels but had changed hands many times at a profit before it reached the coffee-pots of people rich enough to afford such a luxury.

Every morning, the young woman mentally drew a circle on the breakfast table, beyond whose circumference she did not raise her eyes. She detested having to face this family reunion as soon as she got out of bed and it was only during the course of the day that her ill-humour gradually wore off.

"Did you sleep well, my precious?" the old woman asked her son, simpering as if she were bending over a cradle.

The giant baby invariably answered this question as if it were of vital importance to everyone.

"I slept all right, but it was very hot in my room. I threw off all my blankets, but even so, I perspired."

"He can't throw off his fat," thought Baby, pouring herself another cup of tea.

"You perspired, poor darling?" fussed the mother, anxiety in her eye. "You're not ill, by any chance?"

"Of course not . . . Have my shirts come back?"

"Not yet. Though they promised us them for the day before yesterday."

"It's incredible," thundered Janos. "Living here with two women and not being able to get anyone to look after my shirts. What's happening about my shirts, Baby, please?"

"I gave the shop your collar size three days ago and they swore everything would be ready in two days' time—yesterday."

Baby smiled as she remembered the assistant's startled face. He could not believe anyone had such a neck measurement.

"If I were still able to go out shopping, you'd have had your shirts ages ago, dear," said Janos's mother.

"Mamma knows perfectly well that's not the point," retorted Baby sharply. "The shops don't care twopence nowadays. It's not like before the war."

"Don't be so snappy with Mamma," scolded Janos.

"It's because I'm not even allowed to sleep nowadays," Baby complained peevishly. "And I do so terribly need sleep."

"There was a letter for her," explained the mother, hoping to get some further information. "That was why I woke her up."

"Who's the letter from?" demanded Janos, his elbows on the table.

Baby pulled the letter out of her pocket and held it up close to her eyes.

"It's from Anna. I recognise her writing."

"Perhaps she's telling us there'll be a food parcel arriving," suggested Mamma.

Baby refrained from opening the envelope. She could read the letter later. After all, it was no concern of the other two.

"Are you coming to the rehearsal?" inquired Janos.

"I've got to go to the hairdresser."

"All right, only come to the theatre afterwards. A chap from the National Defence will be there too and I particularly want you to meet him. What are you going to wear?"

"My blue dress and the beige shoes with the high heels."

"You'd be wiser to wear low-heeled ones. You know they're going a lot into the question of comfort for women workers and

they've decreed that high heels are bad for health. I've just been reading an article about it in one of the papers."

Baby gave him an icy look.

"I'm not a working woman and I think low heels are hideous."

The old woman clucked with delight.

"She took you seriously, Janos. You got away with your little joke!"

Janos pinched his wife's ear.

"Forget it, little silly!"

"Oh, you're hurting me!" squeaked Baby. "I'm going to have my bath now. I'll meet you round about half past twelve."

He caught her as she passed and gave her an affectionate little slap.

"Now, now, pussy! All the little claws out again?"

The mother, shut out now, watched them resentfully.

"Come and give me a kiss before you go," she said to her son, surreptitiously fingering the lumps of sugar that had found their way, as if by chance, into the depths of her big pocket.

* * *

That morning, Baby went off to the hairdresser's with as much eager haste as if she were going to meet a lover. She rejoiced in the dazzling sunlight because it gave her an excuse to conceal her short-sightedness behind dark glasses with corrective lenses. Before the war, the shops in the neighbourhood she was walking through had set pretty women dreaming with their splendid, tantalising window displays. One little shop with its blinds down used to be kept by the best shoemaker in Budapest. The last time she had gone there to order shoes, she had been received, the moment she entered, by an affable, well-dressed gentleman who had devoted his entire attention to her. Her feet sank pleasantly into the deep pile of the carpet. The arm-chair she was offered was roomy and softly cushioned. After he had inquired the type of shoe she wanted, the salesman had gone down on one knee,

and taking her foot in his hand—her stocking was as fine as a cobweb—he had brooded over it at length, as if it were a precious jewel to be mounted. He had drawn its outline, studied its shape, and measured its curves. Then he had brought a huge bundle of pieces of leather, smooth and supple to the touch, so that she could choose the exact shade she wanted.

Baby remembered how her heart had swelled with pleasure at the thought that she was a woman—and a pretty woman, too.

The master-shoemaker had vanished during the upheaval and the whole neighbourhood now looked completely different. Instead of luxury articles, cunningly disposed in glittering windows, there was nothing now but lowered blinds and meagre displays. And everywhere, the red star, the bloody star, was stuck up as if to mock the passers-by.

In the old days, Baby's spirits had risen the moment she entered the hairdresser's. She had breathed in with delight that slightly heavy atmosphere, laden with delicate scents. The proprietor, in his impeccably white jacket, had hurried forward, smiling. He always attended personally to his elegant clients who drowsed pleasantly under the electric driers, a pile of foreign magazines at their elbow. Now the linen was no longer immaculate and it was forbidden to import French magazines. Even the dyes were not what they had been, much to Baby's chagrin. It was a jealously-guarded secret that it was not nature that had endowed her with the golden halo that framed her face.

One of the former assistants was the proprietor now—a swarthy, sickly-looking man whose hands always gave the impression of being dirty. He did not come forward to meet Baby; he merely indicated a vacant place with a curt nod. Before the mirror in front of her lay a comb with some dark strands still in its teeth; on the floor, tufts of cut-off hair lay in pools of spilt water. Baby turned away, disgusted and, to distract herself, began to read her sister's letter.

"My dear Ilona . . ." The young woman made a face. Why address her by that discarded name she loathed when she had

a nickname she liked? It was so typical of Anna, that narrow-minded way of never deviating from what fate and our parents have decided on for us: our Christian name, the colour of our hair, our personality . . . Anna had protested vehemently when her sister's dark brown hair had suddenly turned to blonde. Anna was now the only person who knew this secret; all the other witnesses had disappeared during the war. With a faint sigh, Baby went on reading her letter.

" My dear Ilona, I am writing this letter at half past two in the morning, so don't be surprised if it's rather incoherent. I have had a serious quarrel with Sandor—it nearly turned into a drama. You know that, if I'm asking you to do something for me, it's because I really do need your help—that it's something of absolutely vital importance. I implore you to have Ida to stay with you for a few weeks. She could give your mother-in-law a hand with the housework and, in any case, she'll bring enough food to last you the whole time she's with you in Budapest. She'll tell you what's happened—it's difficult for me to explain it all in a few lines. Ida will be arriving by the Friday afternoon train. I'm too worn out to go on with this letter. Love—Anna."

Baby frowned as she refolded the letter. This was the last straw, to be landed with her booby of a niece. Besides, she loathed letters in that pathetic strain. Drama, urgent necessity, vital problem—the typical expressions of a tiresome little provincial, making mountains out of molehills. Anna *would* express herself like that!

Meanwhile, the hairdresser had begun his task. Baby had leant her head back and was awaiting the soothing touch of a jet of warm water when surprise made her gasp and cry out: the water was ice cold.

" It'll soon get warm," the hairdresser declared curtly and began to rub the thick hair with no attempt to be gentle. His hands were brutal and he was obviously in a hurry. Perhaps he too had some rate of work to keep up with; perhaps he took part in those " Work Conferences " announced on the salon walls on posters dedicated to the greater glory of the Stakhanovite

workers? He gave her a rapid rinse, still with cold water, rubbed her head with a towel that had already been used, swiftly set her curls, then, having switched on the drier, went off, without a word, to another customer. At first, a current of icy air whirled around inside the helmet. Baby's teeth chattered. She stuck out her head to light a cigarette. Scraps of conversation came from the next-door cubicle. ". . . the two others have been nationalised. And did you know Peter is . . ." a gesture, probably, replaced the words " done for—he took a job without a regular permit . . ."

" How else could he manage to feed his children," said the other voice, almost in a whisper. " They haven't a penny left and they're starving . . ."

" Shh . . . don't talk so loud . . ."

Exasperated, Baby put her head back under the drier. Obviously, everything was in league against her to-day. Every single thing was depressing: the cold water; the letter announcing the arrival of her niece—that letter involving her in her sister's matrimonial quarrels—and now those words she had overheard by chance.

It was midday when she left the hairdresser's. The heat was intense. Baby had promised to be at the theatre round about half past twelve, so she had enough time to have a cup of coffee. There was an attractive little " Espresso " bar in Kossuth Lajos Street; she made her way to it at a brisk pace so that she could not be taken for an idle loiterer. Seated at one of the tiny tables, she ordered her coffee, lit a cigarette and felt happy once again. The sun was shining, her hair was freshly done, the coffee was excellent. What more did she want? She was not one of those who burdened their hearts with other people's misfortunes. With her eyes half-closed, she let herself dream vaguely and agreeably as she watched the spirals of smoke coil up from her cigarette.

But, suddenly, she started. What would happen if a flying squad found her there? Lately, the police often accosted customers in cafés and restaurants and asked them how they paid for their drinks, how they earned the money which permitted them this

luxury. Of course, the wife of the celebrated conductor would have no difficulty in providing the necessary justification. All the same, it was wiser not to draw attention to oneself. One never knew . . . With one swift movement, she got up, laid some money on the table and hurried away to the theatre.

Even the change in the political régime had not succeeded in opening the doors of the National Opera to Janos Tasnady; his talent fell just short of the required standard. This being so, he had founded his own theatre, on the strength of his relations with the government. This theatre only performed lyrical works of a minor order. The enterprise was undoubtedly thriving; the orchestra was well directed and the musicians carefully picked. All this was admirable as far as it went but there was one thing even more necessary. This was that the representative of the Ministry of National Defence, who was coming to the Opera to-day, should be favourably impressed by his visit.

At the corner of the passage leading to the theatre, Baby passed a newspaper kiosk. Her eye was riveted by the cover of an illustrated periodical. The whole page was taken up by a single photograph: a hanged man dangling at the end of a rope. As a slight concession to decency, a sack had been drawn over his head to hide the convulsed features. Baby went closer and, thanks to her glasses, was able to read the caption under the picture. Involuntarily, she started and drew back; the ground seemed to open up under her feet. Making an effort of will, she pulled herself together and hurried on, looking neither to right nor left, her heart throbbing like a hunted animal's. The name she had read under the photo was their own name. The condemned criminal was her husband's first cousin, photographed ten minutes after his execution. Under the Nazi occupation, he had been Secretary of State, and, as soon as the Russians arrived, he had been arrested. His long-deferred trial had just brought him to the gallows . . .

The conductor had often had recourse to him during the war, but discreetly. He had carefully avoided showing himself in public with this compromising cousin. Janos had always been

convinced that the Germans would end by losing the war. Nevertheless, the two of them had often dined at the secretary's villa. Without admitting it, even to herself, Baby had had a weakness for this tall, slim, elegant man who was a good horseman and a first-class shot. He always bowed very low to salute her, but always stopped a fraction of an inch above her outstretched hand. Never once had his lips touched his cousin's white, velvety skin. He flirted with her a little in a discreet, polite way but Baby knew that he was equally gallant with any pretty woman.

Baby tried to recover her calm as she greeted the stage-door keeper. She did not slacken her pace till she reached the dark corridor that led to the wings. There, she leant back against the crumbling wall, her eyes closed, panting and shaking all over. Muted sounds reached her where she stood: Janos's voice stopping the instruments and explaining something: then the orchestra starting up again and a soloist beginning to sing. The young woman advanced slowly towards the stage and pushed the iron doors open with both hands. She emerged on to the stage. She smiled at the players whose eyes lifted from their music parts to follow her movements, walked carefully down the little stairs that led to the auditorium and sat down in the front row. On the stage, the faces were sharply defined in the limelight. At that moment, Janos's powerful body and perspiring forehead induced no repugnance in Baby. On the contrary, she felt vaguely comforted and managed to regain her poise.

Janos gave his desk several short, sharp raps.

"We'll stop for five minutes," he said, mopping his brow. He called out to a group of singers who were chattering as they strolled off into the wings:

"Klein's to stay behind! Do you hear, Klein?"

A voice answered from the wings:

"Let me just go and get a roll, maestro. I'll be back in a minute."

Janos came down into the auditorium. Baby went to meet him and whispered:

"Have you seen the *Illustrated Observer*?"

Her husband gripped her by the arm, swung her round and said loudly:

"Baby, let me introduce you to Imre Törzs, the political Commissar."

She caught sight of a young man sitting in the third row of the stalls. He must have been there before she arrived. Without getting up, he held out his hand:

"I'm delighted to meet you. Won't you both come and sit with me?"

"I've got a few words to say to the orchestra before we begin again. But my wife can stay here with you," replied Janos. "After the rehearsal, couldn't we all three go and have a glass of beer?"

Törzs consulted his wrist watch.

"I shan't have time."

"We'll try and get through quickly," said Janos, returning to the stage.

Törzs offered the young woman a cigarette:

"Do you sing as well?"

"Oh, no," she smiled gently. "I've no voice and I sing out of tune." She looked at the man who was speaking to her.

"Are you fond of Opera?"

"That depends," he answered evasively.

"Depends on what?"

"On what they sing and on the person sitting beside me. If it's a woman as beautiful as you are, I couldn't care less what's happening on the stage. I find you very attractive."

Baby smiled, without finding a retort. The banality of the compliment offended her like an insult. "It's not possible," she told herself, "that the subsidising of this theatre should depend on such a boor. There must be some mistake." Out of the corner of her eye, she observed this tall, lean dark-haired man: he must be about thirty. His jacket, too wide on the shoulders, betrayed the fact that it was heavily padded. There was a little brown mark on his obstinate chin: a scar? He was tirelessly making notes in a little note-book.

The young woman felt ill at ease. She would have preferred to join her husband but was afraid of annoying the police officer. It seemd to her that the walls of the darkened theatre rose to the skies and that the rows of empty seats stretched to infinity. The stage, the only bright spot in all this dimness, seemed very far away. She felt herself isolated there with Törzs, delivered over to occult powers; she foresaw with utter certainty that this person would play a part in her life. Was he really writing?

His pencil occasionally stopped for quite a while. . . .

It became imperative to say something to break this oppressive silence but all the young woman succeeded in doing was to stare, entranced, at the quivering of the tiny india-rubber fixed to the end of the pencil.

Suddenly the stage lighting became brighter. There was a bustle among the singers and Janos turned round and addressed the police officer.

"Only another quarter of an hour, Imre—then we can go."

Törzs acknowledged his remark with a nod. Then he leant over towards Baby and whispered in her ear:

"You know how to keep quiet, don't you? You've left me in peace all the time I was taking notes. That's pretty unusual in a woman."

"Klein, stop eating," scolded Janos.

"I thought, as I wasn't singing in this part we're rehearsing . . ."

"Let's get on with it, let's get on with it!" Janos's nerves were on edge. The spell-binding music of the number they were rehearsing filled the theatre, soothing and lulling Baby who knew every bar by heart.

"I kiss your hand, Madame," murmured someone at her side.

"Good morning, my dear Arpad," she said, her face lighting up with a smile that she meant to be particularly amiable. The puny little Jew respectfully kissed her hand; his lips lingered a moment on the scented fingers.

Baby introduced the two men.

" Arpad Klein, baritone, one of the pillars of the Lyric Theatre. Imre Törzs, of the Ministry of National Defence."

The men shook hands in silence. Klein was embarrassed. In the course of the last five years he had had enough trouble with certain authorities to make him extremely suspicious of any individual who wielded power in a government office. Above all, he hated sleuths in plain-clothes—there must be some snag about the theatre and he would have liked to stay to find out more about it, though his instinct warned him it would be wiser to efface himself.

" May I come and see you this afternoon, Madame? " he asked the young woman.

" But, of course. We always like to see you and Mamma will be simply enchanted . . ."

" I hope I haven't annoyed the maestro too much, I should be terribly upset . . ."

" Of course not. It amuses him to pick on someone or other now and then, but he's extremely satisfied with you."

" Really? " Joy irradiated Klein's face. He stood up and hurriedly said good-bye, as if he wanted to preserve this last impression and carry away the assurance like a talisman.

Baby's eyes followed his clumsy walk, punctuated with little nervous jerks of the head, as if he were perpetually dodging a blow. It was only a slight tic but, on the stage, it often looked ridiculous.

" I must go," declared Törzs, standing up in turn. " Tell your husband I'll come back another day but that it's impossible for me to wait for him. Good-bye . . ." he said, clasping the young woman's hand.

" Good-bye," she replied, under her breath.

He went off. Baby half-turned and observed the tall, lean figure whose right shoulder was higher than the left. Had he been born like that or was it the result of bad habit? The young woman caught herself mentally inquiring about Törzs long after his departure. She was clear-headed enough to realise he had made something of an impression on her. She remained motionless,

glued to her stall, enjoying the physical and mental inertia that, in some way, cut her off from her surroundings . . .

It was an escape like any other and she dreaded the words that, in a moment, would ruthlessly put an end to her dreaming. She had only one desire; to stay like that indefinitely, withdrawn into herself and wrapped in her vague thoughts. But already, the musicians were putting their instruments away and the air buzzed with laughter and scraps of conversation. And then among all the noise, rang out the inevitable summons:

"Baby, are you coming?" Her husband's voice sounded far away and impatient, full of mysterious undertones. Every morning that same voice repeated those identical words to her: "Baby, are you coming?" Only too often, she had to obey it. Then she would get up, still drunk with sleep, trail through her mother-in-law's room while the old woman watched her under lowered eyelids, cross the narrow hall and go into her husband's bedroom. As she slipped into the beckoning bed, she felt as if she were being immersed up to the neck in warm, dirty water. Groaning under the weight of the man who flung himself on her, she would lie gritting her teeth and staring at the ceiling, longing for the moment of liberation when she could plunge ecstatically into her scalding-hot bath.

"Baby, I've already called you three times!" said Janos. He had come up to her without her noticing. "What's this? . . . Törzs gone?"

"He had to go but he said he'd soon get in touch with us."

"Why didn't you find some way of keeping him?" exclaimed Janos furiously. "Apparently I can't count on the least help from you. Törzs is extremely influential at the moment and . . ."

"Let's go," broke in Baby impatiently. "What did you expect me to do? I could hardly hold him back by his coat-tails, could I? All you had to do was stop your rehearsal sooner."

"But that was quite impossible! The chorus, the orchestra . . . nothing's up to scratch. It's all to bits—it's positively bad! Besides,

I've jolly well got to prove to Törzs that I maintain discipline and that we keep strictly to our rehearsal times."

They made their way through the dim corridors that smelt of mildew. When they emerged from the building, the suffocating July heat overwhelmed them as if they had stepped into a very hot bath. Their smoked glasses turned people and things an unnatural colour. The paper seller was still there at the corner of the street, mopping his brow, and repeating, without much conviction: "Just out . . . Buy the *Illustrated Observer* . . . latest number."

"Suppose you buy a copy," murmured the young woman. "On the first page there's . . ."

Her husband nudged her. "Be quiet . . . I've got one in my pocket. I'll show it you when we get home. Here, someone might see us."

"Do you think he suffered much?"

"I prefer not to discuss all this in the street. Did you do anything about my shirts?"

"They'll be ready to-morrow," said Baby, quite at random. And, as her mind turned to the neck-measurement of those shirts she suddenly thought about the neck measurement of the man who had been hanged. How many centimetres had been needed for the running noose?

They walked on in silence. The asphalt under their feet was melting in the sun. They had nothing to say to each other and they hid their inner disturbance from the passers-by. It was the fourth year of the new régime. People had become accustomed to living on two totally distinct moral planes. In their innermost depths lay the indelible memory of their former life while, on the surface, the new principles, the new habits, had already formed a crust. Perpetual anxiety had trained their reflexes to such a pitch that, even when awakened from deep sleep, they instinctively and infallibly adopted the correct attitude.

Janos regarded the four years that had elapsed as a guarantee of security. "If they've spared us all this time," he often said, "why should they start making trouble for us now?" His cousin,

the ex-Secretary of State, had been in prison for three years; no one mentioned him any more: the family was beginning to think that the whole business would end quietly, without any fuss.

"If they try him, he'll probably get off with detention for life," Janos explained to the others. "But it's quite on the cards that the whole thing will fizzle out." He invariably added, "Whatever happens, not a word about our relations with him."

"But your name's the same as his, darling," his anxious mother would remind him. "He's such a near relative . . ."

"Still, that doesn't make us responsible for his behaviour," Janos would retort edgily.

One day Baby had timidly suggested they ought to arrange for some food and cigarettes to be sent to the prisoner. Her suggestion had been extremely ill-received.

"Look out for yourself if you get mixed up in any nonsense of that sort! We mustn't even so much as mention his name or they might think we're bemoaning his fate. All he had to do was lie low and say nothing during the German occupation. If he hadn't compromised himself so much, he might have come through all right, too. . . ."

"You're absolutely right, my big, clever boy," sighed the mother, wagging her large head.

"After all, it's only your Christian name that's different," said Baby dryly, going one better.

"Well, what of it? What are you insinuating? Am I supposed to open my veins to get rid of this relationship?"

Both of them remembered those conversations as they walked side by side in the sunshine. They would very shortly be repeated sitting round the table and the steaming stew. The thought made Baby feel more and more sick at heart. She knew that she was walking, wide awake, through a real town, yet everything seemed as unreal as a dream; the unexpected announcement of Ida's arrival, the appearance of Törzs who both fascinated and repelled her, and, above all, that dead man whose ghost pursued them as in a nightmare. . . .

"You're pale," remarked Janos, as they entered the porch of their home. "I bet you didn't eat enough this morning, as usual!"

Baby gave a sigh of relief. For once, the smells from the kitchen and her mother-in-law's flabby fatness seemed pleasantly reassuring.

The old woman's welcome was a shade reproachful.

"How late you are, children! If the stew's dried up, it'll be entirely your own fault. . . ."

They sat down to table. Mamma had brushed away the crumbs from breakfast but Baby recognised the stains on the cloth. She was surprised to find that, in spite of her emotions, she was hungry. She ate hurriedly, so as to shorten the meal as much as possible.

"Do you like it, son?"

Janos made an impatient gesture. Mamma's eyes became round with alarm.

"Has something happened?"

"Jenö's been hanged," he replied laconically.

Mamma started as if she had had an electric shock. Then she hastily made the sign of the Cross and muttered: "Jesus, Mary . . . Jesus, Mary . . ." Her heavy body collapsed in the chair as if some internal spring had suddenly given way; her foot, seized with a convulsive trembling, began to drum on the floor. "She's play-acting," thought Baby, "no one could possibly tremble as much as that."

"How did you hear this appalling news?" asked the old woman, leaning over towards her son. Without waiting for the answer, she added:

"If only nothing happens to you, my darling boy! I'm so terrified sometimes . . ."

She went on mumbling slowly:

"Jesus, Mary," she said again. "Do you think he suffered much?"

Janos was preparing to give grandiloquent explanations when he was suddenly frustrated by the nervous tic that had that great, vigorous body at its mercy. How could he articulate imposing phrases with a left eyelid that kept remorselessly fluttering?

"It's before his death he must have suffered," he said simply. "The prison . . . The suspense . . . The hanging in itself, that couldn't . . ."

He wanted to say that the moment when the swinging body broke the cervical vertebra could not have been particularly painful, but he felt a strange tightening in the pit of his stomach and the sentence remained unfinished.

Baby crumbled her bread with her fingers.

"When all's said and done," she told herself with an irony that hurt, "this is our cousin Jenö's funeral feast. While we're having second helpings, we're discussing how much he must have suffered and trying to guess which was the most agonising moment for him . . ." Feeling sorry for the dead man, she interjected into the discussion the remark she had been holding in reserve since it began.

"My niece Ida's arriving to-morrow afternoon by the four o'clock train. That's what Anna said in her letter. There's been some scandal or other at home, I don't know exactly what. We'll have to make up a bed in the little room."

"And you don't tell us that till this very minute!" Janos exclaimed furiously. "This is really the last straw! What are we going to do with that great lump of a girl? No, send them a telegram at once she's not to come!"

A satisfied smile betrayed Mamma's secret thoughts. She was delighted not to have to take a direct hand in the quarrel. Faced with this united front, Baby saw red:

"It's the least we can do for them," she replied in a cutting voice, "and Ida will help Mamma with the housework."

"But it's impossible," growled her husband. "Don't you understand that our situation couldn't be more precarious at the moment? One careless word—and we might be ruined! I need Törz's backing for the theatre subsidy, so we've got to try and make a friend of him and invite him here often. Well, then, can't you just see your idiot of a niece dropping some brick that might wreck everything?"

"Ida's a sensible girl and talks very little, anyway. Besides,

when your famous Törzs comes here, she can perfectly well stay in her room or go out. After all, she's not counting on staying here indefinitely. Anna's sending her to us for three weeks and she assures me she'll bring enough food with her to provide for all of us for her entire stay."

Janos shrugged his shoulders and rose from the table as heavily as if he had to lift the ponderous piece of furniture too.

"It's all one to me, but if anything happens, don't say I didn't warn you . . ."

The old woman collected the plates. Baby retired to her room.

"Won't you come to my room for a little while, you naughty girl?"

"No. I'm tired and I'm going to sleep."

"You just wait, I'll pay you out for that," Janos threatened. But his voice had no conviction in it.

Mamma, who was shuffling round clearing the table, stopped for a moment so as not to disturb this conjugal exchange. But Baby had already slammed the door behind her, slipped out of her clothes, flinging them down anyhow and stretched herself out completely naked on the divan. The heat defied the closed windows and drawn curtains. It was the siesta hour: the entire building was silent. And it was then, that in this flat where everything seemed calm, that the hanged man appeared like a ghost.

Trembling with horror, Baby started out of her drowsy semi-consciousness, snatched a blanket from the bed, wrapped herself up into it and curled herself up in a little ball in the far corner of the divan. But it was useless. Through her closed eyelids she could see, she could feel the dead man sitting there at the other end, in the attitude she knew so well. He was as tall as Janos, but much thinner; a severe illness had prematurely whitened his hair as if the powers beyond the grave had allowed him to return among the living on condition that henceforth he wore a white peruke. Oh! how well Baby knew that almost imperceptible movement with which he hitched his trousers up over his knees before crossing his legs. . . . As usual, he was wearing black shoes with

pointed toes and an immaculate shirt under a dark suit. His voice, which he rarely raised, had a soft, but extraordinarily persuasive tone. . . .

One night, long before the German occupation, they had danced together in a little bar to the sentimental tune of a slow waltz. With all her frustrated femininity aroused, Baby had hoped at last to make some effective contact with this attractive man; to break down that indifferent politeness; to feel some response to her own feverish craving in the pressure of the arm round her waist. She had drawn a little closer to him and, with an eloquent little sigh, had laid her cheek against the face that was still so young under the crown of silver hair. But her prey had eluded her. Jenö had drawn his head back a trifle, and, looking straight into the young woman's eyes, had launched into a long dissertation on the latest football match between France and Hungary. At the same time, his arm had loosened its pressure against the silk of her dress. Deeply humiliated, Baby had seen her delicious evening ruined. Yet she had borne no resentment against Jenö for this wound to her self-esteem for she had a passion for everything that remained unexpressed and unexplained. Even in that refusal she had seen a kind of contact, a little secret they held in common. Every time she found herself in Jenö's company she had an odd nostalgia for the romantic sins that sheltered under the froth of lace of the late nineteenth century.

During these last years, she had now and then walked past the walls of the prison where he was detained. Each time, she had quickened her step and not so much as dared to raise her eyes. "If ever I see him again," she had said to herself, "I shall tell him all those perverse little desires that have made such a turmoil in my heart . . ." But, in her heart, she had known all too well that she would never have the chance again. . . .

These pictures passed before Baby's eyes as if she were watching the luminous strip of film in a cinema. She did not attempt to drive them away for she was half asleep and aware of the fact. Yet, at the same time, her senses were awake to all the details of reality:

they registered the heat, the dimness, the notes of the piano rippling in the next room.

Janos had changed his sweat-damp clothes for the coolness of pyjamas but, instead of lying down, he had seated himself at the piano and was deciphering a score, humming lightly as he played. His fat white fingers ran supply up and down the yellowed keys. The chord he had just struck vibrated for a long time through the drowsing flat, then died away without the musical phrase being ended: the pianist's hand had suddenly stuck fast on the ivory keys . . . Before his eyes, the first page of the *Illustrated Observer* had superimposed itself on the score; that horrible photograph of the man hanging from the gibbet, with the two arms tied behind the back creasing the black jacket at the waist.

Janos threw a terrified glance all round. He wanted to call his wife but he knew that Baby's icy indifference would only heighten his nervous tension. His mother was asleep. He was alone; deserted in his struggle against the ghosts rising up from the past. How many times he had asked his cousin's help over various affairs when the latter was in power! It was thanks to their family connection that he had threaded his way through all the comissionaires and secretaries who barred the way to his cousin's inner office. Jenö always received him with the same pleasant affability: perhaps he waited just a second too long before indicating an arm-chair on the other side of the desk with his slim, elegant hand and saying: "Do sit down . . ." The telephone invariably kept interrupting their conversation. Generally, Jenö granted all his requests with polite resignation. He realised that, in the wake of all brilliant careers, there is always a solid group of relatives claiming their share of the gleanings.

As soon as the Germans occupied the country, Jenö was overnight appointed Secretary of State to take over the functions of the outgoing minister. The posts left vacant by all those who had opted for the Resistance were filled by politicians who enjoyed the confidence of the occupying power. Few officials had retained their former allegiances; arrests were as much the order of the day

as spectacular promotions. Learning that the director of the National Opera had been dismissed, Janos and his family swelled with ambition.

"Who'll they find to replace him except *you?*" his mother had buzzed excitedly. "Jenö's only got to say a word and the thing's done! You'll at last be appointed to the post you ought to have had long ago. . . ."

"It's not quite as simple as that," Janos had feebly protested, quivering with suppressed excitement.

The family took counsel together. They decided that the first, most essential thing was to get in touch with this extremely powerful cousin. But, when they invited him to dinner, the cousin asked that the dinner should be postponed some weeks as he was overwhelmed with work.

"It'll be too late," his mother had anxiously assured him. And, three days later, Janos had taken the initiative and presented himself at the Ministry.

Jenö did not keep him waiting. He promptly offered him an arm-chair and a cigarette, while Janos explained the object of his visit.

Jenö listened without once raising an eyebrow. Then, leaning back in his chair, he replied in a calm, measured voice:

"I'm sincerely sorry, but it can't be done, my friend. It really can't be done. What's more, I couldn't be more distressed about it for there's nothing I'd like better than to give you pleasure. You know I appreciate your talent and that I thoroughly sympathise with people who have ambition for I'm ambitious myself. But, there's just one thing. One's got to be a realist and to know one's limitations. You're a remarkable conductor and an excellent composer, but one needs more than that to manage an enterprise like the National Opera. No, believe me, you'd be heading for certain disaster."

A burning tide swept over Janos's temples. Jenö went on gently and imperturbably:

"You know I'm always at your disposition and that, in the

past, I've smoothed out this and that little difficulty for you. But I absolutely refuse to get you a position that would eventually ruin you."

"Who's the candidate they prefer to me?" Janos asked brusquely.

"Frankly, I haven't the least idea. My days are too full up and I've too many responsibilities to bother about the Opera into the bargain. Besides, I'm taking over the work of the Minister for Internal Affairs, not the Minister of Education. Don't take this badly, my dear Janos, but, for once, it's no. All the same, don't hesitate to come and see me if ever . . ."

Janos did not wait for the end of the sentence to take his leave. Jenö accompanied him as far as the thickly-padded door.

"Give my kindest regards to your mother and Baby," he had added as they parted.

Crouched over his piano, his fingers clenched on the keys, Janos could envisage that scene again down to its smallest details. There was a damp patch between his shoulders where his pyjamas felt clammy. "If he'd granted my request, I might have been dead by now," he thought. "Luckily, no one knew what I did—no one knew I tried to get that post under the Occupation. No one knows but myself and that dead man who can't talk, thank heaven." For, on his return from the interview at the Ministry, Janos had told his family that he had given up the idea of getting Jenö to use his influence for his nomination.

"I can't compromise my entire future for the sake of a few months. After all, the Russians are already fighting on the frontiers of Hungary—in a few weeks the whole situation may be completely reversed from top to bottom. . . ."

"Do you really think they might come as far as this?" the old woman had asked, pretending to be horrified. Her one desire was to change the topic of conversation for, in her heart, she was not deceived and neither was Baby. The latter was sharp enough to be quite sure there was something in the wind for it was highly surprising to see Janos give up a project so long brooded over, ripened and cherished . . . "Jenö's probably politely turned him down

but he daren't admit it to us," she had thought. And, in spite of regretting the directorial box, it had given her a certain pleasure to imagine the scene that must have taken place between the two men. After that, the affair was never discussed except when Janos boasted of having avoided, by a sudden intuition, that great and dangerous temptation.

The silence in the flat was absolute now. The mother's noisy breathing had died down with the last note of the piano. Yet the old woman still lay uneasy on her bed, with her eyes closed. She too was profoundly disturbed by Jenö's death, that death that she had gone so far as to wish for the man who had hindered her son's career. She had suffered cruelly over that disappointment for she idolised her only child. Had she not given him birth in order that he might be crowned with imperishable laurels? For his sake, she had accepted everything, submitted to everything, even to that odious daughter-in-law he had inflicted on her. "Yes, a man needs a wife," she kept telling herself, "but couldn't he really have found something better than that lazy little slut who peacocks around in the glory of his name?" The old woman shuddered: that name of which they were so proud, what might it be going to drag them into?

In that drowsy flat, all three of them were searching for some reassuring phrase, some lucky omen, no matter what. They were all frightened; frightened of the morrow, frightened of one another. Suspicion had eaten away the bonds that still united them. They withdrew into their separate selves; an invisible wall divided them. Even if he had done it on purpose, Jenö could not have sown more discord among them; for that alone he deserved to die, yes, even to die by hanging.

The front-door bell rang. Janos got up heavily and went to warn his mother.

"It's probably Klein," he said, but his voice was far from assured.

"Don't worry. I'll go and let him in."

"All hail, Maestro," said Arpad Klein as he entered. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all, not at all, come in."

Every time Klein entered the Tasnadys' flat, he was seized with strange uneasiness and had to wipe his sweating palms before greeting the ladies. The conductor's hall reminded him of the stage curtain but the piano in the drawing-room intimidated him more than the stage. Even when he was a tiny child, Arpad Klein had had only one dream—to become an opera singer. The lack of money or some other reason had always been an obstacle to his ambition. Then there had been the war, with its underground life. When the Lyric Theatre came into being in 1945, Janos spent entire days, sitting, in his shirt sleeves, in the front row of stalls, giving auditions to unknown singers. He needed to engage a large company and had little money at his disposal; he therefore took on a few beginners of moderate pretentions—Klein was one of them—he had a silvery tenor voice that was perfectly comfortable in its middle range but he dreaded songs that suddenly went up high as an epileptic dreads the fit that catches him unawares, for his voice had the vexing habit of going out of tune in the region of his top C.

Touched by the enthusiasm of this Klein who displayed a dog-like devotion to him, Janos often took special pains with him. To-day Klein had come to go through his main song in *Rosenkavalier*. The little man was feeling in his best form; intoxicated by his own voice, he could already see himself in a Louis XV peruke, wearing white satin embroidered with gold and holding a marvellous woman, in a black lace mask, in his arms.

"Stop! Stop!" yelled Janos. "Can't you hear you're out of tune?"

The great *Rosenkavalier* waltz, ruined by the false notes, shattered itself against the wall like a wounded bird falling back to the ground again each time it tried to take flight. Baby, still lying on her divan, felt all her nerves on edge. The blanket had slipped to the floor; she felt too weak to retrieve it, though she was shivering in spite of the heat. Klein's arrival had delivered her for a moment from Jenö's ghost but she had sunk back into a kind of lethargy.

Baby was frightened; she was filled with strange presentiments that made her shudder. Something was brewing, something she could not define but that she could feel in her bones with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. Why had she met Törzs at the very moment she had learned of Jenö's death? Why did the man who had been in power under the fallen régime and the representative of the Red government seem to have met by pre-arrangement in the shadow of the gallows? "How old can he be?" she asked herself, thinking of Törzs. She stood up, flung the blanket over her shoulders, and went and looked at herself in the mirror. There was no denying it; her hair was not properly done. There was no comparison with the way it had looked in the old days when the proprietor with the white streak on his temples used to win prizes in international hairdressing competitions . . . What had become of him? Had he been killed during the siege of Budapest? or was he perhaps a prisoner in Germany, or in Russia . . .?

Baby hurriedly got dressed and went into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea.

2

STARTING UP in bed, the notary consulted the luminous dial of his alarm clock. Had someone knocked at the door?

Through the window, that opened on the garden, swathed in morning mist, came great drifts of the sweetish scent of petunias. It spread along the walls and wove a network of perfumed threads all through the room. The man was sharply conscious of the smell of it even in his nicotine-saturated nostrils. With a sudden movement, he flung off his bedclothes and began to pace up and down the room. He dared not look out of the window. With his nightshirt hanging down over his legs, he looked like a giant child, frightened of the dark.

Had someone really knocked, after all?

He hesitated, then went and leant on the window-sill. A cool breeze blew from the lake, announcing the dawn. The notary shivered. His nightshirt, soaked with cold sweat, stuck to his back. Apparently he must have had hallucinations this time for though, lately, they had repeatedly come and knocked at his door to make sure he was there, the dog had always barked. He had not the strength to leave the window. Nowadays he was sure he was being watched, that they were trying to find a pretext to get rid of him. Someone must have denounced him.

He was about to withdraw into the room when he saw someone walking across the garden. He watched, with his heart beating fast. It was his daughter Ida. She was approaching stealthily. The dog gave a faint growl, no more. A few moments later, the

front door gave an almost imperceptible creak; then all was silent again. Still uneasy, the notary went back to bed.

Beside him, his wife lay fast asleep. "She doesn't pay the least attention to what's going on under her nose," he thought, hating her. He listened to his wife's breathing. In his strange, torpid state, he thought that Baby must have received their letter by now. In that case, Ida could leave the day after to-morrow. That would at last put an end to this shameful love-affair. Then unconsciousness engulfed him and he fell asleep.

In the morning, he was awakened by the golden sunlight. He took a warm bath, then, with a few swift, precise strokes he shaved, scrutinising his face in the mirror as he did so. Recalling his memories of the night, he felt as if he were spying on a stranger's secrets through a keyhole. With a faint sigh, he finished dressing and left the room. Outside the door, he stopped for a moment, as if he had forgotten something. He screwed up his face, but nothing occurred to him. He walked hurriedly across the passage, through the dining-room and out on to the veranda.

"There you are at last!" exclaimed Anna, his wife. "I was just beginning to think the coffee would have to be warmed up."

She pushed the coffee-pot towards Sandor's empty cup.

"Where's Ida?" he asked.

"I think she's still asleep but Theresa's already gone off to church to decorate the altar."

"Last night . . . " the notary began but, at that moment, Ida appeared on the veranda. She kissed her parents and sat down at the table. The notary unfolded his newspaper. He tried to read, but in vain. The print danced before his eyes. His over-tense nerves registered everything that went on behind the newspaper. Anna had left the veranda and Ida was eating with small, unperturbed movements. He was aware of her breaking her roll, buttering it, dipping a morsel of it in her coffee. Now she was drinking—the cup tinkled in the saucer. There was a rustle of paper . . . she was trying to light a cigarette. Three times the lighter refused to work then, at last, the flame sprang up. The

notary wanted to roll his paper up in a ball and fling it on the table but some indefinable feeling—a mixture of delicacy and fear —paralysed him.

" Where were you last night? " His mind formed and reformed the words, trying to find exactly the right intonation. He could see himself slowly laying down the paper, walking over to the door and letting the question drop just as he went out. But he was incapable of doing it.

The cigarette smoke hung suspended above the table like an unformulated question. With shaking hands, the notary folded up his newspaper and went out without saying a word. Lost in her dreams, Ida smiled gently. Her arms were covered with a light down, bleached by the sun. She put the cigarette to her lips with such a tender, sensual gesture that she seemed to be touching the lips of a sleeping lover. She inhaled the smoke deeply; a shudder of pleasure ran through all her limbs. The veranda swam round her; she turned a little giddy and put her head down on her bronzed arms. Ida wanted to get up, go back to her room, and sink once more into her dreams. But her limbs were heavy: she could not force herself to move. The already hot sun darted its rays through the Virginia creeper and made patches of light and shade on her rounded shoulders. The rays scorched her skin. Green and red stars danced in front of her lowered eyelids, and, in the midst of these strange fireworks she could see Marton's brown, muscular body bending down over her. . . .

The little maid, coming to clear the table, broke in upon her reverie. Ida leant back lazily in the wicker arm-chair. The maid deftly swept up the empty cups and put them on a big tray. A bee was struggling in the honey-pot. Ida fished it out with a spoon and deposited it on the stone floor of the veranda. Its wings were glued together and it stuck to the stone, but the insect pulled itself clear, staggering several times but gradually becoming more free in its movements. Then it crawled forward, leaving a shining track behind it. Ida could not take her eyes off the bee. The servant was still busy at her work; she was shaking the tablecloth over the

balustrade. The crumbs fell like fresh manna from heaven on the ever-busy population of ants. The young peasant girl turned to pick up her tray; her heel trod on the little bee. A tiny crackle and all was over. Ida cried out:

"Idiot! Couldn't you look where you were going?" With a lump in her throat, she stood up, and, carefully avoiding the crushed insect, went upstairs to her room. She meant to put on her bathing-dress for Marton had arranged to meet her on the beach at eleven.

The bedroom was calm and cool. It was the only place in the world where she felt completely secure. There, even the furniture was friendly. When she touched the cupboard, the little creak it gave when she opened it was almost like a word. Ida suddenly remembered that she had left her bathing-dress out in the garden to dry. She slipped on her white sandals. The sole of one of them was twice as thick as the other.

The girl locked the door of her room, then hid the key behind the pots of flowers displayed on a stand on the landing. Then she hurried down to the garden. She stuffed the bathing-dress into her bag and set off towards the lake.

Where the wood ran alongside the village, the hill sloped steeply down to the lake. Her feet kept slipping on scattered twigs. A little out of breath, Ida leant against the slender trunk of a young tree and looked down at the glittering sheet of the lake below her. It was one of those splendid days that mark the Hungarian summer. The heat shimmered in drifts of white mist over the lake whose blue was as intense as the sky it reflected. On the far bank, the Badacsony reared its massive heights. The vines that covered it produced the deliciously fruity wine that made its name famous. A sailing-boat rocked on the lake like a graceful seagull.

Ida followed the slope and, every time her foot slipped, she lengthened her stride. At the foot of the hill, the railway lines ran across the path. There was no barrier: the train only passed once a day. The hot sleepers oozed with oil and tar. She still had the main road to cross—her sandals sank into the asphalt—then came

a little wood; then, at last, the dazzling sand of the beach. It was deserted. Ida went into a rickety cabin to undress. A humid warmth exhaled from its worm-eaten boards. Her slim, muscular body shivered at the contact of the still damp bathing-dress. Then she ran out into the blinding sunshine and threw herself down on the burning sand, with her arms flung out as if to embrace the soil. Nevertheless, her mind was full of vague misgivings. Where was Marton? Why hadn't he come yet? Had he, by chance, met the beautiful Melinda on the way? Were they sitting chattering on some shady bench? She felt a fierce pang of jealousy. Theresa was decorating the altar of the little church at the moment but it would not be long before she came down to the beach too. Ida leapt to her feet, and, with one bound, she was in the water. Little fishes brushed against her ankles; she struck out resolutely into this supple element that opened up before her only to engulf her the faster and more completely. She was no longer aware of anything but the scorch of the sun on her shoulders. Her body took on an insubstantial lightness; cool currents surged up from the depths of the lake, caressing her thighs and breasts. She began to swim with long, slow strokes. Around her, the deeper water showed tints of emerald. Happy and relaxed, she turned over on her back, with her face towards the shore. Two shapes stood out sharply against the pale sand; two people sitting side by side, very close to each other . . . Ida's heart stood still. It was *those two* and they had come down together to the beach! She tried to swim back, but the current was against her now. She made no progress and spiteful little waves splashed and blinded her. Furiously, she thought of Melinda, the lovely girl who was sitting there beside Marton, tanning her slim legs.

Ever since Marton had returned from the prison camp, Ida had been his mistress. They met at night in the cabin among the vines.

Though she was by now close to the beach, Ida could no longer see the two silhouettes. "They're lying down side by side," she thought. Suddenly a rippling laugh pealed out and echoed across the water like a pebble bounding over its surface.

"What can be making Melinda laugh like that?" she asked herself uneasily. The laugh went on so long—it was so close, so intimate—that Ida stopped swimming to listen. She wanted to catch a fragment of a sentence—a word—a reply—but all she could hear was her now laboured breathing and the beating of her heart. She flung herself on the water again and swam on her back. Her crippled leg—two inches shorter than the other—floated on the waves. It seemed to her as light as a child's paper boat. The water swathed her wretched, deformed hip in its gentle embrace.

Here was the shore at last. Ida turned over and advanced on all-fours. Her limbs became heavy; they seemed to have turned to lead. She staggered towards her friends; their gaze seemed to burn right through her. Physically and nervously exhausted, she limped more than usual before she collapsed beside them on the sand.

3

THOUGHTFULLY the notary stared at his fingers. Just now, when he had stubbed out his cigarette, he had noticed how yellow they were. Thick veins stood out on the back of his hands under the reddish hairs; his nails looked like tiny corrugated spades. The middle finger of his right hand was stained with ink; the ring finger of his left was encircled with a broad gold band. That ring aroused in him a kind of disgust; it brought back every detail of last night. Once again he lived through Ida's return from her lover's arms and the terror that had overwhelmed him when he thought someone was knocking at the window. He knew very well that the Party was spying on him. He had the feeling of being watched through the walls of his own house. He leant over his files and began to write.

Someone knocked at the door. Like a red-haired puppet, the head of his assistant poked round it.

"Madame Szabo wants to talk to you about some question of taxes—may I send her in?"

"Taxes? But that's your pigeon, old man . . . Deal with her yourself and have done with it."

"She's been insisting for at least half an hour that she must see you personally. She also wants to talk to you about something else."

"All right, send her in."

A tall, stout peasant woman pushed her way in, sweeping the little red-haired man with the folds of her ample black skirt.

"A very good day to you, Mr. Notary, sir—I just happened

to be passing this way so I said to myself, p'raps I might come and have a word with you about something. Don't worry, I won't keep you long."

The man indicated a chair.

"Please do sit down, Madame Szabo."

The woman sat down and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her sleeve.

"I'm having a lot of bother over the delivery of the last harvest. The State claims much too much, sir. If I give up all my maize, there'll be nothing for it but to kill all my cattle. What'll I have to feed them on?"

"Dear lady, there's nothing I can do about it. The decrees come direct from Budapest and we can't change a word of them—myself much less than anyone."

The woman said nothing. Then she leant forward, like someone coming to the crucial point of a conversation.

"If you'll allow me, Mr. Notary, sir, there's something I'd like to draw your attention to."

He laid down his pen and scrutinised her.

"They're talking about Miss Ida in the village. It seems they often see her at night over among the vines, not far from the little hut. The moon's so bright these nights . . . it shows up everything . . ."

She broke off and hesitated, like someone unsure of the ground ahead and testing it with their foot before advancing any farther.

"The village is never altogether asleep . . ."

With a convulsive movement of his loins, the notary sent his chair rocking backwards and sprang to his feet. He went over to the woman and pulled her up by her arm. She moaned under the iron pressure of his fingers.

"Leave the room this minute," he said very low, between clenched teeth. He dragged her, quite dazed, to the door and pushed her out into the passage.

Outside, the clock struck noon.

4

THE NOTARY stood for some minutes, leaning his head against the door, waiting for the tumult in his blood to die down. Then, taking a deep breath, he left the room himself and forced himself to walk nonchalantly through his assistant's office, looking as if nothing had happened. It was not till he found himself in the shiny, tiled passage that he quickened his steps. He burst into his wife's room like a whirlwind. Anna was sitting in front of her looking-glass, combing her thick mass of hair.

"Have you gone mad, Sandor?" she asked, half-turning in his direction.

"Not yet," he answered in a strangled voice. He collapsed into an arm-chair, lit a cigarette and went on in a voice that he forced to sound detached:

"That old Szabo woman came round to see me for the express purpose of telling me that the village spies on Ida at night when she goes to meet her lover."

Anna appeared not to have heard. With slow, graceful gestures, she gathered up her hair and twisted it into a chignon that she secured low on her neck with pins and combs.

"That Szabo woman is a malicious old Grundy," she said at last. "For the last three weeks I've stopped buying the milk from her. I suppose that's why she's got a grudge against us."

Her husband settled himself squarely in his arm-chair and shut his eyes. Insulting words trembled on his lips but a curious feeling of delicacy paralysed him as it had this morning when he pretended to read the paper so as not to have to look Ida in the face. He

was ashamed, as if he were responsible for these happenings which which were sullying his home. Dreaming wide awake, he had often taken the measure of his frustrated marriage and reviewed those heavy, suffocating nights from which he always emerged beaten, with the ashy after-taste that followed his humiliated sensuality. Ida was not his child. Often he used to imagine scenes in which he played the noble part of the conqueror who could afford to be magnanimous and pardon in the grand manner. In reality, what happened was just the opposite: his knees knocked together, the sweat broke out on his forehead—he was terrified. And now, once again, when he risked saying something, his manner was that of someone leaning over a balcony with no safety-rail.

"This morning, at dawn, I was at the window when she came home . . ."

"Did you see her?"

"No, but there was no possible doubt. The dog began to growl, but he stopped at once. I wanted to go out . . ."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because I didn't want to catch her in the act, like a thief."

The woman stood up, exasperated.

"I'm going to the kitchen to see how lunch is getting on. The parish priest's arriving at one. Are you coming?"

The notary lit a second cigarette and waved his hand.

"Just give me time to smoke one cigarette and I'll be with you."

His wife scowled at him. Was she going to let this intruder stay here alone in her bedroom? Then she shrugged her shoulders and quietly shut the door behind her.

The notary collapsed back, inertly, in the deep arm-chair. It seemed to him that the pieces of furniture were stupid animals crouching all round him, staring at him with their starting eyes.

"I'm ill," he told himself. "This is hysteria."

For him, the walls, the carpet, everything in the house reflected Anna's look. That look lived with them like a mysterious third person. He had seen it gleam in her eyes for the first time when he had suspected that Ida was not his daughter.

That suspicion had ripened slowly in him, fed by light-hearted remarks of his wife's about the flirtations of her girlhood.

"It was pure chance that I married you," she had said cuttingly at the end of some hopeless discussion. "Pure chance—and the fact that I couldn't see any other solution."

"What do you mean by that? What solution are you talking about?" he had asked, gripped by a sudden anguish.

"Oh, nothing. I had to make up my mind what to do. I had a lot of worries."

"What worries?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. And life seemed to have come to a head and . . ."

"What you're saying simply doesn't make sense . . ."

"Then why do you ask me such silly questions?"

Another day, they were sitting in the arbour and watching the little girl who was playing close by. She was four years old then.

"Isn't she pretty?" Sandor had said, with a pleasure tinged with sadness. "Her hair's just like yours. If only they could do something about her leg!"

His young wife had bent over her sewing.

"It's impossible to break the hip bone *again*. The first operation didn't have the least effect. Why make her go through tortures for nothing?"

"They've got to find a way of curing her," he had repeated. "If only I could be the cripple, instead of her! A man of my age can endure that, but think what it's going to be for her when she's eighteen or twenty. Not to be able to run or dance. The thought of it appals me."

"What a good father you make," Anna had replied, a touch of irony in her voice.

"Just a father, that's all."

"A *good* father," Anna had said with emphasis. "All fathers aren't so fond of their children."

"Of course they are . . . Wouldn't you be just as willing to take over her deformity if you could?"

" That's quite different . . ."

At that moment, the child had put down her toy and begun to limp back towards the house. She managed to run a few steps but her ankle twisted and she fell.

They leapt up on one impulse and ran to her aid. Shaken with sobs, the little thing clung to her father's neck. He picked her up in his arms and carried her up to the house. Before going inside, he turned round towards his wife. She was standing motionless in the sunlight and he was struck by her cold, detached look—the look of a being devoid of pity, insensible to another's pain. He held the little girl tight against him and laid her down, with infinite care, on her child's bed. He sat down beside it and began to tell her stories. But he could not follow the thread of his own words. Another self was there, tensely and secretly scrutinising the child's features. " Those silky curls—they're certainly Anna's," he had told himself. " That straight, delicate little nose may change later on. But those great brown eyes, still misted with tears—those velvety, expressive eyes . . . whom does she get *them* from? Anna's eyes are green, mine are grey . . . and there's not one single member of the family who supplies the answer to *that* riddle." He lowered his gaze to the small fingers with their tapering tips and oval nails; the slender wrists and the hands that were already a touching epitome of what they would be when she grew up . . . " She's my daughter," he had kept reassuring himself, like a man who starts singing because he is frightened of walking in the dark.

From that day onwards, he had attached himself to the child with a deep, tormented tenderness. He took her for walks and told her stories. Often he gave her a bath and afterwards carried her tiny body huddled against his shoulder and tucked her up in her camp-bed. Day by day he tried to consolidate the bonds between them and to overlay the gnawing doubt in his heart with the living impact of every moment he spent with her.

The unchanging round of the seasons brought back the same invariable signs. The scent of the petunias was the summer; the

grape harvest, the autumn. They had bought a vineyard at Badacsony on the other side of the lake; when they went over to it to gather their grapes for the first time, the notary was beside himself with joy. He had the finest house in the village; fields where, all summer long, the corn had swayed heavy with promise; a wife brimming over with health and beauty and this little girl who had only to be cured—as he was sure she would some day—for his happiness to be complete.

Very early on the first morning of that grape harvest—it was so long ago that it seemed almost unreal now—they had boarded the white boat that served as a ferry between Boglar and the other shore of the lake. The sun was already hot through the pearly mist that hung over the water. The blue hill of the Badacsony seemed to be offering them its rich acres loaded with vines. Sandor and the little girl had taken their places in the front of the boat. She kept uttering cries of delight at the sight of the green waves, capped with boiling foam, thrown up by the bows. Sandor, meanwhile, surreptitiously observed his wife. Instead of sitting down, she was leaning over the side, staring vaguely into the water, hardly conscious of what was going on about her. What thoughts were haunting her mind as she shivered and drew her short white jacket closer over her neck?

The boat arrived at the opposite bank. They stepped down the light wooden gangway and climbed the slope. The mountain reared up before them, steep and abrupt, leaving only a narrow strip of coast between its blue basalt rocks and the glistening mirror of the lake. The couple would have made rapid progress if the child had not constantly stumbled as she dragged her crippled leg along with difficulty. The father took pity on her and hoisted her on his shoulders. Instead of feeling it a burden, the weight of the beloved little body filled him with joy and energy; he walked on with a light step, hardly touching the ground. The child felt at ease too : she clutched her father's muscular neck like a sailor clutching his rudder. The distance between them and the young wife increased. She panted after them:

"Not so fast, you two! I can't keep up with you."

Sandor slowed down. But even so, Anna could not catch them up. Out of breath, her forehead covered with sweat, she felt as if the climb would never end and that the summit touched the sky. The walk was exhausting her; she began to feel a little sick. She would have given anything to be lying down alone in a dark room, right away from people and from the heat. On either side of the path, the vintage was in full swing. Light laughter broke out; vivid head-scarves fluttered like many-coloured birds among the great vines; the peasant girls gave shrill cries as they chased away the wasps that, drunk with the sweet juice, buzzed about their fresh, plump arms.

They reached their own vines. The vine-dresser who had looked after them all the summer was waiting for them in front of the open door of the wine press.

"We'll have a grand day, sir," he called out jovially. Raising his wide-brimmed hat, he bowed to Anna.

"God keep you, lady! There'll be wine enough for the winter. You'll have quite a job to drink it!"

They returned his greetings and Ida added joyously:

"Istvan, Istvan, look how tall I am!"

They went to work promptly. Sandor, Anna and the old vine-dresser each fixed a basket on their backs to fill them with the heavy, scented clusters. The child hobbled round them like a sparrow, gorging herself with the pale gold, honey-sweet grapes.

The morning flew past. At noon, they lay down in the shade of a tall tree that seemed to have got marooned among the vine-yards. From their high vantage-point, they looked down at the blue lake and the little boat plying tirelessly from one shore to the other.

"How lovely this all is," said Sandor. "What a rich part of the world this is! . . . And we can hardly complain of being poor, ourselves . . . Tell me, Annuska, is there anything you'd like? We might go to Budapest next month for you to choose yourself

a present. Anything you fancy, whatever would give you most pleasure."

"*I'd* like a doll with black eyes," broke in Ida, who was half asleep on the rug.

"And you, Annuska, what would *you* like?"

"Peace," said the young woman abruptly, lighting a cigarette. Her face, above the flame of the lighter, looked oddly tense and alert. Now that she had given herself away by blurting out that bitter word, she was waiting to see what happened. At any rate, she felt better now that she had succeeded in disturbing this peaceful atmosphere whose very peace irritated her. She stretched out her arm for her glass and drank the remainder of the wine in one gulp.

Her husband sat upright with a jerk, stupefied.

"Aren't you happy, then?" he wanted to ask but he dreaded a too-definite answer. Instead, he leant over towards his wife and said gently:

"What's the matter, darling?"

Anna glanced at the child and, seeing she was asleep, was about to answer. The admission was trembling on her lips but, before she could utter a word, the vine-dresser appeared behind them and exclaimed:

"We ought to be getting on with the work, sir. Otherwise we'll never finish before dark."

They went on gathering the pale grapes in an atmosphere charged with unuttered words that needed to be spoken between them. This tension was exciting, rather than unfriendly. Abashed by his wife's mood, the notary tried to save what remained of the charm of that day which, for him, had seemed so harmonious. His wife had frightened him; she had put an obstacle between them and repelled his advances. There was something in this that irritated him, yet whipped up his desire. Several times already, his eyes had stopped to rivet themselves on Anna's full breasts and on her arms, all glistening with sun and grape-juice. The heady last year's wine he had drunk copiously at lunch was having its effect. The bunches of grapes seemed heavier, the sky seemed nearer the ground.

Everything swam before his eyes when Anna's chignon caught on a stake and sent the black curls tumbling free. With a passionate gesture, he caught his wife to him and kissed the hollow between her breasts. Her reaction sobered him instantaneously. She was seized with such uncontrollable, hysterical laughter that she had to lean against him to stop herself from falling. Her breath smelt of tobacco and wine; her convulsed features turned purple from laughing, then set in a grimace like a carnival mask.

"What's making you laugh like that?" he asked, drawing back a little so as to see her better.

"Everything," spluttered his wife. "Everything . . ." Then, suddenly turning serious again, she added sulkily:

"Now that I'm gay for once, apparently that doesn't please you, either."

From then on, they gathered the grapes in silence.

Towards dusk, they collected faggots to make a bonfire and grill some bacon. Ida, drowsy and happy, watched the dancing flames, squatting on the rug like a young owl fallen from its nest. The smoke, grey and light as pigeon-down, rose in slow spirals above their heads. Anna stuck the rashers of bacon on a long stick, and held them to the flame so that the hot fat could drip down on to slices of new bread. How good it was, that simple country meal! It made them thirsty and the old vine-dresser filled the glasses as soon as they were emptied. Finally, he removed himself some distance away to smoke his pipe. Lying on the rug, they listened to the continuous hum of mosquitoes that hovered outside the protecting circle of smoke.

"We must be getting along," the notary said suddenly.

"We've only half an hour left before the last boat goes."

He took the child on his arm and gave Istvan final instructions about the grapes; then all three of them made their way down to the lake. By the time they arrived, it was quite dark.

"Five minutes later and you'd have missed the departure, Mr. Notary," called the captain, making a megaphone of his hands.

"Here we are, here we are," Anna called back.

They set foot gingerly on the narrow gangway. They had drunk too much for their sense of balance not to be somewhat precarious; they advanced like novices on the tightrope, only sustained in mid-air by the trainer's eye. If the gangway had seemed to them as narrow as a rope, the boat appeared swollen like a wine skin and full of pitfalls. Clumsily, they made their way through a group of passengers, even tipsier than they were themselves, and reached the bows where there was still a little room. They put Anna's white jacket down on a bench and laid the child on it. She was fast asleep. They themselves remained standing, leaning against the side. The boat started off with a muffled throbbing and moved slowly forward over the black water without leaving a visible wake behind it.

The air was heavy. Low clouds hid the stars. The vintagers stopped singing to sleep off their weariness and the effects of their wine. Then, breaking the silence, one man raised a solitary voice. A trifle hoarse at first, it soon rang out stronger and sweeter. The song, a plaintive old folk-song, unfolded in the darkness like some strange bird spreading its wings and flying far away.

Sandor felt his heart beat faster; he gripped his wife by the waist. Anna moved brusquely away from him, leant over the water and began to vomit violently. Her husband tried to come to her aid but she fiercely pushed him away. Luckily the other passengers had begun to sing in chorus so that no one noticed the incident.

"You've drunk too much," Sandor said, a little teasingly, as he passed her a handkerchief.

"Don't be such an idiot . . . I'm not drunk. On the contrary, my head was never clearer. I'm pregnant by you, that's what's the matter. Now I can't even hope any longer that I've just imagined it."

He would have liked to go down on his knees and beg her pardon for mistaking the most sublime of miracles for drunkenness. He would have liked to find the tenderest words, to give vent to his joy. He longed to take his wife in his arms to soothe and reassure her. But he felt petrified by the tone in which she had said:

" I am pregnant by you." Why had she used such crude terms and such a spiteful voice in speaking of the fruit of their love? And why had she announced that she expected a second child in a way that destroyed any illusion concerning the first? No, this time it was no longer a suspicion; it was a burning, agonising certainty.

" I'd had a different picture of this moment," he said in a muffled voice.

" You always imagine things different from what they are," she answered. She sat down on the bench, taking care not to brush against the child's feet. " It's time you woke up to reality. I've let you go on dreaming for seven whole years while we've been together—that's long enough . . . Anyway, what are you complaining about? I'm waking you up with the good news that you're going to have a son or a daughter . . .!"

Sandor was seized with a terrible desire to stop her mouth so as to hear no more. He could already feel the dampness of Anna's lips against his fevered palm . . . but all he did was to clench his fist and remain motionless and silent.

" Give me a cigarette," said Anna.

" It'll be bad for you."

" Not a bit. It'll do me good . . . Why pester me with all this solicitude? Stop all this farce of behaving like a lover. That's the only way to make our life tolerable. Then we can enjoy lovely calm years, with the children growing up and money and universal esteem and all the rest of it, everything one can possibly wish." She ended, with a still more grating irony: " Anyway, the goal's well ahead, we've plenty of time. We're both as strong as horses, we may live to eighty at least . . ."

Sandor said roughly:

" Why did you marry me?"

The darkness hid Anna's face but he could imagine her disillusioned smile as she said in a low voice:

" I decided to become your wife when I saw your house and your garden and the estate you took me to see . . . But the house —it was the house, most of all, that I liked. We were talking

complacently about this and that but all the time, in my own mind, I was shifting all the furniture round and tearing down those horrible dusty curtains and sowing petunia seeds in the beds. No, I wasn't very happy at that particular moment. The man I loved had left me and I felt alone, terribly alone, with a great empty blank in my heart. And there was nothing to take my mind off it except that house—your house—standing up there where you can look out over the whole horizon. Do you remember how I ran up the sloping garden, the first day I came to see your family? We were both young then . . . I thought in time I'd come to love you. I've truly done my best . . . I've shut my eyes and trampled on all my feelings . . . I've tried and tried with every ounce of my strength . . . You're so good with the child, you couldn't be better, so—what more could I ask?"

There was a dull thud: the boat had come alongside. There lay the other shore. A fresh breeze sprang up from nowhere and cleared the air: it began to thunder. Sandor took the child in his arms. She curled up in them as if she were in her bed.

"Good night, Mr. Notary," said the captain, "Perhaps you'll get to the top of the hill before the storm!"

Without even answering, he rushed along the jetty, his eyes blazing and his hair plastered over his forhead by the wind. He ran on ahead as if he were flying from some danger, not noticing whether his wife were following. Suddenly, the tempest broke. Water-spouts poured down, the clayey path that climbed through the woods was transformed into a miniature torrent in which the feet now stuck fast, now skidded. The couple advanced laboriously; the child, wide awake now, clung to Sandor's neck, her teeth chattering. They heaved a sigh of relief when they reached the garden gate; it creaked as usual. Feeling their way across the garden, they reached the house; the moment they entered, they switched on the light. Confronted by those familiar walls, Sandor recoiled for a second: the memory of certain words came back, lacerating him. He felt as if he had fallen asleep in a garden full of flowers and woken up in a crypt.

" Undress the child while I go and make some tea," said Anna.

He agreed, with a nod, and carried the child off to the bathroom. He rubbed her all over, dried her hair, dressed her in a nightdress and a shawl and put her to bed. She was as gay and cheerful as could be; for her all this was a marvellous adventure.

Her mother brought the tea without even having changed her clothes. The water dripped from her hair; her dress clung to her body, revealing every curve; her sandals left large wet patches on the parquet floor. Sandor kissed the little girl and went out. His steps faltered as he made his way to his room. When he reached it, he was shivering with cold as he took off his wet things. His gestures were quite unconscious: he hung his jacket as usual over the back of a chair and carefully folded the trousers that had no shape left. But suddenly, when his nerveless fingers could not manage to unbutton his shirt, he grabbed it with both hands, rending the thin silk, and, to rid himself of it, tore it into shreds. While he was getting into dressing-gown and slippers, his thoughts became a maelstrom. A strange mixture of anguish and hatred sent brutal phrases and vengeful words flaring up in his mind. In a moment, he meant to go and hurl them at his wife. What was he going to do with her now? Drive her out of this house for which she had sold herself? His tortured imagination summoned up an earthquake, a just punishment from heaven. While he fled into the garden, with Ida in his arms, the walls would collapse, crushing Anna in the ruins. No, it was not as simple as that . . . He shuddered, frightened by his own thoughts, and made his way to his wife's room.

He stopped outside the door and knocked.

" Come in," she called out to him.

She was standing beside her bed, rubbing a thick pink towel over her hair and neck and breasts. Completely naked, she stooped down to dry her long slim legs as nonchalantly as if she were alone.

" I want to speak to you," Sandor brought out with difficulty.

" All right. Speak then."

"Put something on."

"I'm not cold any more," she replied, smoothing her hair.

Sandor went up to her and flung the silk bedspread over his wife's shoulders. In spite of himself, his fingers just brushed the cool, velvety skin he knew so well. She did not flinch. Sure of her conquering beauty, she looked the man straight in the eyes and gave the ghost of a smile. He could feel the warmth that emanated from her running up his arm, right up to the temple that began to throb as if it would burst. And he collapsed; subjugated, utterly brought low; engulfed in his sensuality as in a tomb hollowed out to the exact depth of his despair.

He woke the next morning, mortally tired, after a night crowded with nightmares. His gaze met that of his wife, who, lying on her elbow on the bed, was observing him with a cold eye. He would have liked to pull the blanket over his head and escape from the real world back into sleep.

The phantoms who had haunted his dreams now seemed to him like easy-going friends compared to the terribly alive enemy lying by his side. He closed his eyes, hoping to go to sleep again and have another, less painful awakening.

Imperturbably, the young woman studied the features of her companion of the night. No, this broken man with the dark shadows under his eyes and the ill-shaven chin was not a redoubtable adversary. He was a prisoner. She had nothing to fear . . . Her imagination began to wander and drew the outline of another head on the pillow. Delicate features, yet stamped with masculine vigour; eyes that haunted her mind night and day. How infinitely preferable he was, that other who had known how to leave it in time when the game had taken a serious turn. Instead of holding it against him that he had dominated her, conquered her and rejected her, she only loved him the more for it. He was the true love, the only love.

"What time is it?" asked Sandor in a hoarse voice.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"What difference can it make to you? We've so much time to go on living together, there's no point in counting the minutes."

Sandor turned over on his other side and buried his head in the pillow. His wife went on staring at him, silent and motionless, like a cat watching the agony of its prey.

The notary started. The cigarette he had been absent-mindedly holding while his thoughts wandered back into the distant past, was burning his nails. The sharp little pain was almost agreeable, for the physical pain was momentarily stronger than the indefinable malaise that had persisted ever since the scene of the grape gathering. Ever since then, so confused were reality and memory in his mind, he seemed to have remained sitting in Anna's bedroom.

* * *

He looked at his watch. A quarter to one. In ten minutes the parish priest would be arriving and he would have to make conversation throughout an interminable luncheon.

Anna opened the door.

"What, are you still there?" she asked him.

"Come in and shut the door. I was waiting for you to come back because I want to talk to you."

"You know perfectly well I haven't time. He'll be here in ten minutes."

"Very well, we've still got those ten minutes. We've got to find an immediate solution for Ida's problem."

Anna lit a cigarette and threw herself full length on the couch.

"I think she's happy," she said calmly.

Sandor leapt up from his chair and began to pace furiously up and down the room.

"You go beyond all limits of decency! To dare to talk of happiness in the case of this shameless affair! You're utterly amoral."

His wife smiled.

"Here we go . . . Now we've got to the big words . . . Virtue, morality, drama, secret. Believe me, decency's got nothing

to do with happiness. People who are too prudish are just cowards. Don't you agree with me?"

"That's a dig at me, isn't it? *I'm* the coward and the weakling. All right, if you regard immorality as an act of courage, I'm only too willing to be called a coward."

His wife shrugged her shoulders.

"I can't see much point in this conversation. We don't look at things the same way. You don't even realise that your vocabulary's completely out of date. New times, new morals. As to poor Ida, it's quite enough that she was born with a crooked hip. We might at least spare her moral suffering."

Sandor tried to strike his lighter. His hand was trembling with agitation.

"A lover won't safeguard our moral health. Only faith can do that. One's got to believe."

"Belive in what?"

"In a supernatural power which gives a meaning to everything —even suffering. And in eternity as the true measure of time."

"In other words, believe in God . . . why haven't you the courage to call Him by His right name?"

"I don't want to profane that name in your presence."

Anna's voice became icy.

"Oh, stop all this attitudinising! It only makes you look ridiculous. You look exactly like a bald-headed preacher getting up on a tub to harangue a crowd—so blinded by his own fanaticism that he doesn't notice there's no one there to listen to him. If you want to know what eternity means to me, I'll tell you. It means *you!* These interminable mornings, these suffocating days and these nights of ours . . . All these years that I've lived with you when time has stood still . . . Your little tics . . . your feebleness . . . that maddening gesture when you run your hand over your hair . . ."

"You talk of years standing still! My dear, you must be the one and only person in this country who hasn't noticed that a whole world has collapsed in ruins round us. Have you so com-

pletely forgotten those hours we spent hiding in our cellar because they were fighting at the other end of the village? Have you forgotten when the fields were full of corpses that had to be buried where they lay, like dogs?"

"They fertilised the places where they were buried. And I tell you once again; all I care about is this estate and this house. This roof has housed German soldiers, then Russian soldiers. They've gone—and the walls remain. That's *my* eternity."

"Have you forgotten when you had to wash the Russian soldiers' dirty linen in a great cauldron out there in the garden? Wash their shirts that were crawling with lice with your hands?"

"All the women in the village had to do the same as I did . . . But the gardens flowered again. It was the war. One had to accept it and all it involved just as one accepts all the tiresome things in everyday life."

"Didn't you ever say to yourself that, but for an extraordinarily lucky combination of circumstances, you might not still be alive? Plenty of others didn't survive."

"Being still alive just seems to me so perfectly natural, so perfectly simple."

Sandor put up his hand to smooth his hair. But the recollection of what his wife had said paralysed the gesture in mid-air.

"If *you* don't notice the changes all about us," he said, "it's because the present régime is like you. You're in your element at last, in a world that's been remodelled to suit you. The terrorism of the Reds must seem perfectly natural to you. The idea that everything must yield to force fits in with your own notions and your own character. Your discreet atheism—which you hide—not from shame or delicacy, but from sheer inertia, is openly taught in the schools nowadays. And there is no longer a God or any divine commandments, there's no longer any sin or any punishment in an after-life. Children listen to all this, only half taking it in, and their horrified parents daren't say a word."

"You're exaggerating, as usual. They don't absolutely deny the existence of God in the schools. All they try to do is to reduce

the farrago of nonsense that's been taught up to now about the Creator and the creation and creatures to some sort of logic. If one's got to be content with believing everything that's obscure and incomprehensible . . ."

"What a model pupil!" broke in her husband. "If you were merely credulous—but you manage to be evil-minded and venomous as well. You spread your poison all round you."

"Who am I poisoning, you idiot? Perhaps you mean your daughter Theresa whose pet hobby is arranging flowers on the altar and who's off to church at crack of dawn."

"No, not Theresa. You leave *that* one in peace. In any case, it's no use pretending you bother much about her. I'm talking of Ida. You have long talks, the two of you. She confides in you. Very delightful, the young mother and her big daughter. Only you're doing everything you can to make her as much like yourself as possible. You shut your eyes to this shameful, corrupting love affair."

"Love is never shameful or corrupting. It's the absence of love that's humiliating and vile. Do I have to tell you that? Sometimes I feel more despicable than a prostitute, living with you. If only you had enough strength of character to put an end to all that."

"If I turned you out, would you go?"

"You know perfectly well there's no question of that. I've no desire to leave this house and you've no desire to either. You wouldn't know where to go. What I don't want to do any more is to sleep with you. Have I got to say it all over again? I'm perfectly willing to go on living with you on condition you leave me in peace . . ."

The man turned red to the roots of his hair. He felt profoundly humiliated by the reminder of their nights together.

"It's not a question of ourselves at this moment," he said in a dead voice. "It's a question of solving the problem of Ida."

Anna stood up and went over to the looking-glass to tidy her hair.

"The day after to-morrow she's going to Budapest. Different

people, different surroundings . . . Who knows? They might bring about a change."

"At last a few human words," he said. "One could hardly believe it was you saying them."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Let's stop quarrelling. The idea of sending her away isn't a bad one, though things have changed in Budapest too. Communism has infiltrated into people's lives—it's already corrupted them."

"Whom are you talking of?"

"Baby and her family . . . Your brother-in-law Janos is at liberty and they're living in comparative comfort. They've got a flat . . . All that's not normal."

"I'm beginning to believe you're a bit cracked," retorted Anna sharply. "Your terror of communism is turning into a positive persecution mania. Do you grudge the fact that my sister and my brother-in-law are still alive? Mightn't people reproach *you* for being still alive and ask you how you've managed it?"

"You're the only person who hasn't grasped how difficult my life is. I've never been mixed up in politics and I live like a country bumpkin yet I have troubles with the Party. But Janos is someone who's talked about in the newspapers. It appears they're forming a new opera company for him and they'll give him a building to use as a theatre. In other words, they let him go on working in peace in broad daylight, with all the official publicity he can possibly want. Can't you understand that he must certainly have to give them something in return?"

There was a knock at the door: the little maid came in and announced that the parish priest had arrived.

"Take him into the drawing-room—we're just coming."

Anna gave her hair a final touch with the comb. She was already assuming the part of a hostess.

Sandor lingered behind a moment or two. Every one of these domestic scenes left him shaken to the core. He stood up, heaving a sigh, and straightened his tie. Then, with the deceptive

self-assurance of a sleepwalker, he went down to the drawing-room.

It faced north, and, even in the height of summer, remained cool. He greeted the priest, who had risen at his entrance with:

"Praised be Jesus Christ!"

"Amen," replied the priest in a voice of thunder better suited to the acoustics of a church than those of a house.

Anna was busy pouring out the apéritif; an old wine that she had cleverly hidden from the troops during the war. Sandor did his best to keep the conversation going. It was not easy. He kept losing the thread of his thoughts and being unable to finish his sentences. It seemed to him that he had been sitting for hours in that arm-chair with a glass of red wine in his hand. The full red face of the old priest seemed to be growing rounder and rounder as he looked at it. He envied the ease with which Anna smiled and chatted, revealing teeth as white as a young wolf's every time her lips parted. It was she who revived the conversation every time it threatened to peter out. Without the slightest embarrassment, she kept launching fresh topics.

They had got to the point of discussing wines and the relative merits of different cellars.

"There's not one to rival yours, Father," the notary had just declared. No sooner had he uttered the words, than he was surprised that he had said them. "How idiotic," he thought. "What does it matter who has the best cellar? We're all under sentence of death." And the discussion continued inside his own mind. He went on mentally affirming, denying and debating yet all the time he was perfectly aware that, if this farce went on five minutes longer, he would fall asleep or burst into tears.

The maid came in to announce that luncheon was served and they all adjourned to the dining-room. The two young girls made their entrance. Theresa held out her hand to the parish priest. The old man, in his expansive geniality, very nearly kissed her.

Theresa blushed slightly. She had all the fragile grace of sixteen;

her long hair, still damp from her bathe, hung loosely over her slender, slightly bony shoulders.

"She's a fine girl, this little Theresa of ours," exclaimed the old man. "She does the altar flowers. It seems to be her favourite occupation. I don't know what we'd do without her!"

Anna's ironic glance sought her husband's. Serene in her superiority, she wanted to remind him of their recent conversation.

"Put something on, Ida," said the notary. "It's chilly."

"Chilly, in here? I'm stifled."

Sandor was irritated. "She's her mother all over," he thought. "She doesn't understand that I don't like to see her at table with bare arms in front of the priest."

But what really vexed the notary was that Ida, with her bare arms and shoulders and her breasts thrusting forward under the thin stuff of her dress, was the living replica of her mother.

Mother and daughter seemed to delight in parading their perfect harmony and even to go out of their way to display their complicity in everything.

They sat down round a table covered with a white cloth. The soup glistened in plates that had a metallic sheen. Sandor tasted it.

"It's tepid," he thought. "And even nasty. It's a pity it's nasty."

Nevertheless, the guest ate with immense appetite, talking incessantly all the time. Fifty years of sermons had accustomed him to hearing himself deliver monologues; he never even noticed that the atmosphere round him was becoming heavier and heavier. Taking a second helping of roast duck, he continued the story on which he had launched.

"If, at that moment, during the summer of 1945, I hadn't intervened energetically, I should never have seen my stolen effects again. But I solemnly declared from the pulpit, at Sunday High Mass, that I wouldn't give absolution to a soul in the village till all my goods had been restored to me. For if it is a great sin to rob one's neighbour, it's a much greater sin to steal from one's parish priest. And would you believe it? Early the next morning,

I found the entire paraphernalia carefully laid out in my courtyard. They hadn't forgotten a thing, not even the weights of my scales!"

The notary asked himself how many times he had already endured the recital of this post-war episode and how many times he himself had replied:

"It's not that people are fundamentally dishonest, Father; it's that the war has distorted their mentality. They had seen the Russians pillaging their houses and burning their furniture so, as the presbytery was empty, they carried off what they could. They weren't really stealing, they were preserving things."

An admirable reflex nearly made Anna interrupt her husband to stop his indiscreet allusion to the Russian soldiers. But, this time, she let him go on talking. Sandor, seated at the far end of the table, was becoming more and more detached from herself and the house, a mediocre and burdensome individual. So much the worse for him if he ruined himself by careless talk, so much the worse for him if he put his head in the noose . . .

"As for us," she said with a simper, "we were lucky with the Russians. They brought us things—a carpet and a stove. We hadn't the faintest idea where they came from so we couldn't give anything back."

The notary filled up the glasses.

"We ought to have burnt that carpet long ago," he said, embarrassed. "Every time I walk on that carpet, I feel as if there were a dead man in the house—a dead man who ought to be buried."

A crumb got stuck on the old priest's cheek.

Everyone stared at the crumb.

The priest went on imperturbably:

"If I'd been here when the fighting was going on, things like that wouldn't have happened, I assure you. But there I was, stuck over on the other side of the lake. And, believe me, it was much worse over there. Imagine what a battlefield's like, swimming in wine. And there was wine everywhere dripping all down the slopes of the Badacsony, carrying dead chickens along with it. The *keknyelü*

the *süzrkebarat*, all the stuff from the best vineyards was flowing in torrents from the great casks the wretched peasants had been filling before the Russian troops arrived. There were ducks strutting about in the alcohol, completely drunk; the atmosphere was so saturated with all that wine the earth couldn't absorb any more . . ."

" So the Russians halted in those parts for a fortnight," Sandor finished for him. He could not stand any more of those stories already repeated hundreds of times. His lethargy was turning into a growing irritability and he was getting to the point where his whole body seemed to be on the raw. Looking across at Ida, he wondered what would happen if he suddenly called her bluff, here and now, in front of everyone. This absurd notion seemed far more practicable to him than a conversation all by himself with his daughter.

He was struggling, too, against a grotesque vision that kept forcing itself into his mind. He could not prevent himself from comparing this interminable meal to a High Mass which gave no sign of ever coming to an end and whose long-drawn-out rites were too much of an ordeal for the recollection of the faithful. The sonorous voice that rose at irregular intervals was none other than that of the parish priest who might equally well have been reading the prayers of the Divine Office, assisted by his curate. He, the notary, was kneeling in the front bench. The village was observing him. His face was hidden in his hands and he might have appeared to be absorbed in ardent prayer but his heart had become a brazier of hate from which mounted one single aspiration —that his wife should be utterly destroyed. Anna, in her Sunday hat, kept her face bent over her missal, whose pages she never turned. Her thoughts were straying happily somewhere in that past where her husband had no place; she was there with that unknown ghost she had loved, whom she still loved . . . Sin was everywhere, everywhere . . . It was germinating even in Theresa's childlike freshness. Oh, yes, she was pious, but would she have been so fervent if it were not for the young curate with the Raphael-like

profile? Wasn't it partly on his account that she decked the altars? And Ida was telling her rosary with the same fingers that had just caressed her lover . . .

" We're all ripe for the end," he said. Then he shuddered, for, without meaning to, he had spoken out loud.

However, his words must have fitted into the general conversation, for no one had been surprised. It was even possible that his cruel phrase had answered a question that everyone was secretly asking themselves.

" The end—if it's death you're speaking of—is only a transition," said the priest, lighting a cigar. " It's only the passing from one state to another . . ."

Anna got up from the table. They returned to the drawing-room and sank into comfortable arm-chairs as if they never intended to leave them.

Ida was conscious of her father's eyes on her and this made her uneasy. She stood up, straightened a curtain that was hanging crooked and looked about to find another place. Then, seeing no one was attending to her any more, she slipped noiselessly out of the room.

It was well after four when the parish priest decided to take leave of his hosts. He fired off a few final anecdotes and made the notary promise to come up to the presbytery some night for a game of cards. Having walked through the garden together, they suddenly ran out of topics of conversation when they reached the gate.

" You must pack a suitcase for Ida with enough clothes and provisions for three weeks," said the notary when he returned to the house.

He spoke fast and in a decided voice. Anna was startled and more than a little uneasy.

" All right. I'll try. The only risk is that she may be back in three days if they can't put her up."

" She'll not come back until I've straightened things out with Marton."

"You mean to speak to him?"

"Certainly, I mean to speak to him. Only I'd rather Ida were a long way from here. And, now, I'm going back to my office. The rest is your affair."

Left alone, Anna listened to the footsteps growing fainter and fainter along the passage. Then she leant out of the window and called:

"Ida, Ida!"

"Here I am," answered the girl, who was hiding in a clump of trees. "What's the matter? Have I got to come in?"

"Yes, darling. Come along, I've something to tell you."

5

IDA ARRIVED the next day by the expected train. Her thick-soled sandals felt their way carefully down the iron steps from the compartment; she might have been descending the rope ladder of a ship. Someone handed her out her suitcase. The girl took a few steps along the platform, looking anxiously about her. It was not till then that Baby came up to her. Hidden behind a pillar, she had been observing her niece; examining the printed frock that was quite pretty but definitely provincial in cut, the small head with the brown curls, the delicately-moulded bust and slender waist. "Pity she limps," she thought and, with a typically feminine reaction walked up to her with an even more elastic step than usual.

"How do you do, Aunt Ilona," said the young girl, displaying her teeth in a wide smile.

She leant forward to kiss Baby who pretended not to notice what she was doing. Keeping her eyes on the ground, she was crushing out a cigarette-end with her pointed heel as deliberately as if she were squashing a repulsive insect.

"Just call me Baby," she replied brusquely.

Thrown off her balance by her frustrated gesture, Ida tottered a little. Baby caught her by the arm.

"Take care, or you'll fall!"

"No," muttered Ida. "Don't worry . . . I won't fall!"

The icy welcome had filled her with bitterness; there was a taste like vinegar in her mouth.

"Well, come along then!" said Baby impatiently.

" We must get a porter . . . The suitcase is awfully heavy because of all the food Mummy's sent you."

" Don't you know there aren't any porters any more for the ordinary trains? They only come for the international expresses. One carries one's luggage oneself, these days. But if you can't manage it of course I'll give you a hand."

She held out a hand towards the case with exaggerated slowness and awkwardness. Ida forestalled her gesture, heaved up the case with an effort, and made her way towards the exit with a jerky stride. Baby did not catch up with her till they were outside in the street.

" It would be better to take a tram," she insisted. " No point in drawing attention to ourselves by taking a taxi."

Ida followed her without a word. They arrived at the tram stop at the very moment the train of yellow coaches was coming to a standstill with much grinding of brakes. Gathering up all her strength, the girl swung her load on to the platform as if it were merely a light parcel. Baby took the tickets for the two of them. As she did so, she resigned herself to the idea that she would have to look after her niece for two or three weeks.

" Apparently there's been a scandal at home! . . . What on earth's happened? "

" Nothing," said the girl in a colourless voice. Then she took some coins out of her bag.

" Here's the money for my ticket."

" Now, now, don't be silly! You forget you're our guest."

" I don't want to owe anything to anybody . . ."

" Don't be such an idiot, I tell you. Tell me what's happened, instead."

" Didn't Mummy write to you? "

" She didn't tell me anything except that your father was beside himself with rage."

" He's calmed down."

" We get off here," observed Baby, cutting short this conversation that led nowhere.

After five minutes' walk they reached the house. Ida walked so fast that Baby could not even make a pretence of helping her. The door of the flat opened the moment they arrived on the landing.

"It's God who's sent you, dear little Ida," exclaimed Mamma with a broad smile, pressing her to her ample bosom. "Jesus, Mary, what a huge suitcase! And you carried it all by yourself? Why didn't you leave it at the station? Arpad would have gone to fetch it."

"But, Mamma," exclaimed Baby, "you're surely not imagining that Arpad's going to become our errand boy! Janos is the one who ought to have done it."

"You know quite well that Janos mustn't carry heavy weights, otherwise he's incapable of playing the piano for days. I hope, at least, you took a taxi."

"You know perfectly well, Mamma, that you made a scene about my taking a taxi the other day—and in front of Janos too. So you could hardly want me to . . ."

"It's not the same thing, taking a taxi to the hairdresser's and taking one to bring back a suitcase this size from the station. *That's* not an unnecessary luxury," scolded the old woman. "My poor child," she added, turning to Ida.

"But it doesn't matter a bit, Aunt—it wasn't too heavy for me, I assure you. Only, if you don't mind I'd like to go and unpack the food because I'm afraid of the bacon making my clothes smell."

Ida carried the suitcase into the kitchen, went down on her knees and undid the lock. A magnificent ham made its appearance. The old woman clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"Good God in heaven!" she gasped. "What a ham!"

She tore it out of the girl's hands, pressed it to her regardless of the greasy paper wrappings that scattered all over the place, and rushed into the next room.

"Baby, Baby, look!"

"I'm lying down," grumbled the young woman irritably.

"Don't you even want to see the ham?"

"No. I couldn't care less."

The old woman returned to the kitchen. With eyes round as saucers, she burst out venomously:

"It's always the same when she comes back from going into town; she lies down and smokes cigarettes, the lucky devil! *I* don't have such an easy life—I do all the drudgery—on the go all day without any time to rest. But when I was her age, no one ever saw *me* tired!"

Ida smiled so as not to have to make any reply. She went on unpacking. Little sacks of flour and all sorts of country fare lined up beside her suitcase which appeared to be bottomless.

Mamma's voice became wheedling.

"Tell me, dear, what happened at home?"

"Oh, a little family quarrel—nothing serious . . . For me, it was a chance to come to Budapest at last. I only hope I shan't be too much of a nuisance?"

"But not in the least, not in the least, child," declared Mamma, staring admiringly at the ham. "But you must be tired after your journey. I'll show you your room, then I'll make you a nice cup of tea."

The old woman put some water on to boil and invited the girl to follow her.

What they called the "small room" was hardly bigger than a cupboard and faced the front door.

Ida could not repress a start of surprise when she entered it; bales of stuff of all colours were piled up all round the walls, almost to the ceiling. There was hardly enough space for the folding bed.

The old woman explained vivaciously:

"It's the stock of a textile merchant who went off to the West. He left it all with Janos before he went, it's just as if it were ours. I'll ask Janos to give you enough to make a dress with. But forget what I've told you about where all these things come from. We mustn't talk about it."

Feeling embarrassed, Ida sat down on the edge of the bed. The rolls of stuff saturated the air in the tiny room with their acid smell. A piece of pink shantung dangled out of a torn wrapping. Ida

glanced up at the old woman with a look in which surprise mingled with the unspoken question.

"Yes," came the answer. "That's the stuff Baby had that two-piece she's wearing to-day made from. It cost her six hundred florins to have it made up . . ."

"But won't the man all this belongs to really ever come back?"

"Oh, no. You can set your mind at rest about that . . . But lie down for a few minutes . . . I'll call you as soon as the tea's ready."

She shut the door behind her. Ida remained seated on the edge of the hard, narrow little bed, feeling utterly lost. The room, stuffed with merchandise, seemed to be part of a nightmare; so did everything she had seen and heard since her arrival. She was seized with a sudden, intense homesickness for all she had left behind.

Overwhelmed with longing for Marton, for his voice, for the feel of his arms about her, she flung herself full-length on the bed and buried her head in the pillow. Her crippled leg was hurting her cruelly after her immense exertion. "If I had a child by him, perhaps he'd marry me," she thought, with a rush of feeling. She could see herself already, heavy with the child, walking through the main street of the village on Marton's arm. Then she saw the possibility of her lover's refusing to marry her and imagined her father brandishing the great dog-whip to chastise the betrayer; this was not the first time she had been obsessed by such waking dreams; all through the long train journey she had been smiling at the thought of the triumphal return she would make if she had the hope of becoming a mother. . . .

All this time, her great-aunt was busy in the kitchen. She stood on tip-toe and stretched out trembling fingers to the tea caddy, her daughter-in-law's private personal treasure. This almost priceless China tea Baby had received from a friend a few months ago was the source from which she daily drew her ration of pleasure and relaxation. She never used more than a small teaspoonful and preferred to wait a good ten minutes for the tea to get sufficiently

strong. Her mother-in-law had never dared touch this sacred caddy, but, to-day, it was different; she had an excellent excuse. Who could blame her for spoiling the little niece who had arrived with so many good things to eat? She put a good handful of tea into the pot before restoring the caddy to its shelf. Then she laid the table and knocked on Ida's door:

"Come and have tea, my dear."

They were already sitting at the table when Baby entered the kitchen. She knew at once from the aroma what the teapot contained, but, for the moment, she said not a word.

"Shall I pour you out a cup?" asked her mother-in-law with a smile.

"I'll do it myself," answered Baby.

The tea was as black as ink.

"It's a little strong, perhaps," observed Mamma. "But as you were lying down, I didn't want to ask you how much to put in."

Baby's face expressed no emotion, but a small blue vein in her temple throbbed more than usual.

"I shouldn't advise Mamma to drink it," she said. "It would be sure to bring on a heart attack at once."

She charged the words with so much longing that the old woman shuddered. But she forced herself to give an angelic smile.

"You know I don't take any risks with my health and I never drink tea," she replied.

It was not the first time that Ida had visited her uncle and aunt but it was the first time she had been involved in their private life.

It was so different from what she was used to that she felt completely out of her depth and could not manage to hit the right note with these people. This almost exaggerated amiability did not efface the painful impression of her welcome at the station. Ida could only prevaricate with a forced smile when Janos made jovial or mock-paternal remarks such as: "So you've had a row with your parents, have you? Can't say I'm surprised, knowing you. They've had their work cut out to cope with you ever since

you were born." Ida had to keep reminding herself that they knew nothing of what had happened and that they were feeling their way in the dark to try and find out the details of the family crisis.

After tea, the girl found a quiet corner to read in for the very thought of her cramped little room made her feel sick. The smell of the bales of material weighed on her stomach like the memory of a too heavy meal.

" Perhaps having such a keen sense of smell means I'm pregnant," she thought. In vain she read the same passage over and over again in the open book in front of her: the words remained nothing but a series of typographical signs that conveyed no meaning to her restless mind. The door-bell rang, several times. People came in and went out; names sounded in her ears; hands pressed hers. Invariably she was asked when she had arrived and how long she would remain in town. Baby and Janos answered for her without giving her time to get a word in edgeways. Holding her book, she remained perfectly still in the harsh, cold light that left no shadows even in the farthest corners of the room. The daylight had scarcely begun to fade before she turned on the electric light. Yet, up to then, twilight had been Ida's favourite time of day. She had loved that enchanted hour when objects take on a mysterious significance, when even the tick of the clock seems deliberately muffled so as not to disturb one's dreamy thoughts. At home, at Boglar, the sky turned lilac over the water and a warm breeze broke up the smooth mirror of the great lake into tiny waves. The blue outline of the Badacsony turned to dark grey, then to black; it was from those rocky hills with their sun-scorched vineyards that night came down and blotted out the horizon.

" At this very moment," thought Ida, " the maid will be watering the flower-beds . . ." She could see the water running down the peasant girl's stout, sunburnt calves and the petunias humbly bowing their heads under the showering drops. After their watering, the flowers gave out such a strong scent that lingering butterflies fell to the ground intoxicated and lay still, with closed wings. . . .

In 1943, when Ida had been invited, along with her parents, to

have tea with the Tasnadys, their flat had seemed to her a haven of peace. The two sisters had revived their childhood memories, dwelling on every detail with passionate fervour. Towards sunset, Janos had gone to the piano. While he played softly, the others had listened, still and silent, in the growing dusk until it had become impossible to make out people's features or the outlines of objects. Janos's mother had discreetly handed out apéritifs while Ida had listened ecstatically to the music, sitting on a cushion on the floor; her whole being in a trance of bliss.

During the fearful siege, Anna and her husband had had no news whatever of their relatives in Budapest.

German soldiers and refugees had described to them the appalling fate of the town. They had spoken of famine and typhoid epidemics in Buda, the phantom city where the front changed from street to street, from house to house, over the heads of a population buried in the cellars. Before the final occupation by the Russian troops, the trains had begun to run again. Cattle-trucks had discharged great batches of people from the city: people with hollow cheeks and eyes starting from their sockets, who clung with frozen limbs to the steps and buffers of the trains to try and reach the country, the eternal source of food. What they had told of their experiences had surpassed the worst horrors one had imagined.

Anna had feared the worst for her sister and her brother-in-law. She had written several times to their old address without realising that this address no longer represented anything but a heap of ruins. She had never received an answer . . . They had read about the arrest of their cousin Jenö in the papers and that was all. At that time, everyone stayed where they were, cowering terror-stricken in their own homes. Thus the two hundred and fifty kilometres that separated Budapest from Boglar seemed to stretch farther from day to day. Once the fighting was over, the Russian troops in their dirty grey uniforms had poured over the entire country like a rain of ashes after the eruption of a volcano. The notary went on working in his office, pale and gloomy. Without stopping to reflect, he carried out all the measures—frequently

contradictory—dictated by the central authorities and kept his mouth shut. Months went by. Then, suddenly, they received a letter from Baby, announcing that they were still alive. " Mamma is in better health than she has ever been. Janos is very busy and we have a lovely new flat. I hope all of you are well and send you my very best love." Once the first sensation of relief was over, they had reread this laconic letter, whose tone was almost gay, and been extremely puzzled by it. Even the letters they exchanged later had never quite dissipated the uneasiness left by that first brief note. Anna's questions never received a definite answer.

" They're frightened—they've got the wind up about something," said the notary.

" What could they have to be afraid of? " objected Anna. " No, I'm sure you're wrong . . . Baby's never been capable of writing a decent letter—she's always been too lazy for that."

With kindly anxiety to help, they had regularly sent them food parcels.

When Ida had seen her aunt again at the station, she had been struck by the change in her. Her features, though still young, had hardened and her eyes were uneasy. The vehemence with which the old woman had flung herself on the food had shocked the girl. The rooms in the flat were large, but almost empty. The bombardment had pulverised the family's belongings along with their home. Now they only had been able to buy the barest necessities in the way of furniture.

To the question: " How did you manage to get such a good place to live in? " the old woman had replied, as if reciting a lesson she had learnt by heart: " This flat is State property and Janos is an important State official. Isn't it natural they should have given him a decent flat? " Ida had never dared ask who the former owner had been: she had contented herself with hoping that he was safe on the other side of the Iron Curtain, rather than rotting somewhere in captivity. Was it fear of his ghost that drove each member of the family trio to switch on the electric light the moment daylight began to fade?

Ida shut the book she was holding: they were calling her in to the evening meal. It was strange to find her parents' ham and bacon on the table. Even the tarts that accompanied them had been made from the flour she had brought from home. . . .

Her eyelids grew heavy; she felt suddenly very weary; weary in body and still more in mind.

After dinner, Ida would have liked to smoke a cigarette. But when she reached out her hand for the box of matches, three pairs of eyes fastened on her with an astonished, slightly disapproving look. She understood and rose from her chair.

"I'll relieve you of my presence," she said, with a heavy heart.

The old woman flung her arms in a burst of tenderness, a tenderness that reeked too much of gratitude for a well-filled stomach. At the moment she was about to press her lips, still glistening with bacon-fat, against Ida's cheek, she restrained herself, like an actor suddenly aware that he has forgotten his part. Hastily reassuming the attitude of a dignified matron, she traced a little cross on the smooth forehead inclined towards her. The girl flushed with embarrassment. Baby's look, suddenly hostile, hardened like melted wax at the touch of marble. Janos, on the contrary, felt a rush of affectionate pride; for him, his mother's piety was the safety-net under the acrobat, an insurance contracted with this God whose existence he dared not definitely deny. He was so grateful for this feeling of security that he nearly offered his own forehead too for his mother to trace the redeeming sign on it.

Ida left the room. They waited till she had passed through the hall and shut the door of her own cubby-hole before beginning their conversation.

"I wonder if she can hear what's said in here," remarked Janos, forcing himself to sound detached.

"I don't think so," answered his mother, a trifle uncertainly, if anything happened, she did not want to be held responsible.

"You can't hear anything from her room," Baby cut in peremptorily. "And, in any case, I'm sure she'll go to sleep at once. These country bumpkins go off into a stupor as soon as it's

dusk, just like animals. I was watching her at dinner—she was dropping with sleep."

"She strikes me as a thoroughly nice girl," her mother-in-law risked.

"Certainly she's a thoroughly nice girl," replied Janos, "but that's not the question. It's simply that her presence here at this particular moment is something we'd have been better without. You two have got to get it into your heads that our situation's highly precarious—that we've got to watch every word we say."

"Because of Jenö?" asked the mother. Her eye was malevolent and her voice loaded all the weight of her resentment on to the dead man.

"Of course," answered Janos impatiently. "Our name tends to mislead people and I'm constantly having to explain that I've always disassociated myself completely from this precious cousin's attitude."

Baby felt she could stand no more. She did not even listen to these words she already knew by heart. There was a bitter taste on her palate from having smoked too much and she had a pain in her back. She would have liked to get up and go back to her room but she dreaded the long hours of sleeplessnes. No, it was better to stay here rather than lie in the dark, waiting vainly for sleep to come. She felt like a fish imprisoned in a bowl with two aquatic monsters; her husband and her mother-in-law. She knew that, with every attempt to escape, she only dashed herself against the glass wall. It was the same for the other two; they too swam round and round among the water-weeds of hypocritical words. They too were terrified by all their unspoken inner thoughts.

The mother gave a lengthy yawn and this frank reaction of hers broke the spell.

"She's sleepy," Baby thought enviously. "That old creature will go to bed and sleep as if there were nothing the matter . . ."

Furiously, she hunted for some topic to revive the conversation and drive the merciful sleepiness out of her mother-in-law's eyes.

"Is Törzs going to come and see us to-morrow?" she asked point-blank.

Janos shrugged his shoulders.

"I've no idea. I hope so. We've got to soften him up, make him feel he can come round here whenever he wants to. Every single thing depends on him—the theatre subsidy, security, peace of mind, life, in fact . . . If he realises for himself that we've thoroughly adapted ourselves to the new régime, my whole future opens out. Who knows, they might even send me to Moscow on a study trip . . ."

"We ought to have escaped to the West before the town was besieged," said Baby, in a shrill, high voice.

"We should have been exceedingly stupid to do that. Sooner or later, they'd have overtaken us. You can see for yourself—there won't be a war and communism will triumph everywhere without bloodshed. To survive, you've simply got to adapt youself to this new day and age and prove that you thoroughly deserved to be left alive."

"Do you think that's possible, dearest boy?" inquired his mother with the fervour of the ambitious schoolboy who always sits in the front row.

"Of course it's possible. I had a good hunch when I joined the Party as early as 1945. Just think if I'd still got to go through the whole mill at this point, we'd be sunk!"

"It's already gone on for years," sighed Mamma.

"What's gone on for years?"

"Why . . . communism!"

"In Russia, it's already existed for over thirty years."

"That's not at all the same thing," objected the mother, quite exhilarated by her display of independence.

"But of course it's the same thing," declared Janos, raising his voice. "It's idiotic to think of ourselves as being still in Hungary. This country forms part of Great Russia just as Austria and Germany soon will too. And after them, the whole of the rest of Europe."

"All the same, there's been a lot of talk of war," murmured Baby.

Janos's expression changed like that of a child glimpsing a Christmas tree through the keyhole.

"A war," he said, his voice charged with wistful longing. "Obviously, if a war were to save us . . ."

The old woman leant over towards him.

"Yes, but there are all these stories of atoms . . . What would happen if they dropped that frightful thing on us?"

"It would be far better . . . better than all this," he mumbled very low, and his face took on an expression of intense weariness.

The brilliance of the electric lamp shed a light as cold as winter rain over the little group. Without a word, Baby got up and retreated to her bedroom. She fumbled feverishly among her beauty preparations till she found the little bottle of sleeping-tablets. When she went to get some drinking-water from the kitchen tap, she bumped into her mother-in-law. The two women stared into the whites of each other's eyes, like two short-sighted bats dislodged from a cornice by a sudden shaft of light.

Baby heaved a sigh of relief when, at last, she stretched out under the sheets and drew them up to her chin. Without turning out the bedside lamp, she began to wait for the blessed torpor the sleeping pill would bring her.

Janos and his mother had also gone to bed without even wishing each other good night. And they, too, had kept their lights on, for nowadays they were frightened of the dark.

The noise of doors opening and shutting had intrigued Ida, as much as the ray of light that filtered under her door now that everything seemed to be quiet. Three times she had been on the point of going to see whether someone had suddenly been taken ill but each time she had pulled the bedclothes over her again, without daring to leave her room. She felt terribly alone and far from anyone who cared about her. Now it would be Melinda whom Marton took down to the beach and this tormenting vision made her suffer, though it seemed to her as inevitable as the fact of her being a cripple. She clung to the thought that Melinda was not one of those women who give themselves on a sudden impulse and,

throbbing with passion and delight, she pictured the marvellous night when she would once more be in her lover's arms. With their senses sharpened by separation, they would lie together on the rustling straw of the little hut, overwhelmed by their anguish of love.

" And, this time, I shall have a child by him," she said to herself, as she hugged the pillow to her. She forgot the thread of light under the door, the hatred all about her, the ugliness of the world. Just before she fell asleep, a happy smile relaxed her features. She had realised that she, the cripple whom fate had disinherited, had discovered the true meaning of life.

6

At a quarter to eleven the following morning, Törzs rang at the Tasnadys' door. He kept his finger on the bell-push, being the kind of man who goes on ringing till he is let in. In spite of his dazzling white shirt, his loose, ill-fitting suit and the slouching way he held himself made him look badly groomed. He waited.

The mother happened to be on the other side of the door; she trembled like a thief caught red-handed. In the morning, when the others were still asleep, she always slipped into the hall, opened the door of a big cupboard and caressed an object hidden under a pile of linen. It was enough for her comfort and reassurance merely to touch this sacred object, the last vestige of her vanished grandeur. It was a shield bearing the family arms that she had carefully preserved, along with her jewels, during their long sojourn in the cellar. Janos knew nothing of his mother's secret: he thought that this family relic had perished along with everything else during the siege. Had he known, he might have destroyed the escutcheon; any mark of distinction constituted a danger for citizens of the new People's Republic.

The summons of the bell grew more peremptory and galvanised the old woman into action. She shut the cupboard and opened the front door. She was the only one of the family who was completely dressed. Baby had as yet given no sign of life and Janos was having breakfast in his dressing-gown.

The mother nearly fainted when she recognised the visitor as Törzs.

The police officer gave her a slightly quizzical smile as he greeted her.

"Good morning . . . Is the Comrade Conductor in?"

"Yes, indeed . . . Please come in. My son's just having his breakfast. He slept very badly last night, poor man."

Törzs stiffened, as he stood there in the hall.

"Why did he sleep badly?"

The hot flush mounted in the old woman's cheeks. Had she dropped a brick? Shaking with apprehension, she mumbled:

"He caught a chill, a day or two ago."

Törzs walked through into the dining-room without knocking. Janos was on the point of drinking his coffee. The cup suddenly turned so heavy in his hand that he nearly dropped it.

"My dear Imre, it's God who sends you!" he exclaimed with a radiant smile, as if to welcome a beloved friend. No sooner had he uttered those words, than he could have bitten his tongue out. How could he have made such a terrible *faux pas*? Fancy greeting an important official of the communist régime with an outmoded formula that reeked of the bourgeois era? He wanted to explain that he was not in the habit of using this expression which had somehow tripped off his tongue but Törzs did not take him up on it. Without a word, he sat down and put his elbows on the table.

"I've come to carry your wife off," he said, lighting a cigarette. "I've got to go and see a man who deals with children and I thought that might interest her. Women usually like seeing over orphanages."

Janos vaguely realised that he would be wiser to put a stop to this excursion. Baby was not sufficiently well instructed about what to say or not to say.

"I don't think it would interest her very much. She's not the maternal type and she's not politically minded."

Törzs smiled.

"How do politics come into this?"

Mamma entered the room, bringing a fresh cup.

"May I give you a cup of coffee?" she asked.

" Gladly. One's always the better for a cup of coffee. Thank you."

Janos cleared his throat and took his courage in both hands.

" My dear Imre, tell me . . . how do we stand about the subsidy for my theatre? "

Törzs gave him a sidelong glance.

" We'll talk about that again later—this afternoon, perhaps. As a first step, go and tell your wife that I want to take her out."

" Baby's still . . ." began the old woman. But she had not time to finish " in bed ", for Janos got up from his chair and broke in:

" I'll go and have a word with her at once. She's in her bedroom; I presume she's not quite finished dressing."

He went through his mother's room and burst into his wife's like a whirlwind. Striding across the dark room, be flung back the velvet curtains.

The young woman reacted to the sudden, brutal incursion of light, but the sleeping-drug she had taken too late, sucked her back almost at once into unconsciousness. Baby half-opened her eyes but did not recognise the face bending over her. She gave a faint moan and tried once more to take refuge in sleep. Janos gave her a ruthless shaking. He was nearly out of his mind at the thought of leaving his mother alone with Törzs. Who knew what the old woman might be inadvertently letting out to him at that very moment? All the same, the most important thing was to put Baby on her guard . . . and he had only a few moments to do it in. At all costs, Törzs must not know that Baby was still asleep at eleven in the morning!

He tore off the bedclothes and frantically shook the lovely, limp body.

" You'll have me to deal with if you ever take a sleeping-drug again," he gasped, almost sobbing with nervous frenzy. He plunged his thick fingers in the glass of water on the bedside table and sprinkled Baby's face. At last the young woman regained consciousness and sat up.

"What's the matter?" she asked, clutching her husband's pyjama jacket for her head was swimming.

Janos sat down beside her and whispered in her ear:

"Törzs is here. He's come to fetch you because he wants to take you to visit some sort of children's home. I'd much rather have got out of it but it's impossible—he won't take no for an answer. Be frightfully careful what you say. Be absolutely ruthless about Jenö if anything crops up about him. Harp on the fact that we never had any contact with him, that we loathed him because he was a Nazi. Have you got that well into your head?"

"Yes," replied Baby. Her mind was already beginning to come awake.

"In the course of conversation—but naturally, as discreetly as possible—bring it to his notice that I'm a zealous Party member and that my Lyric Theatre is definitely an enterprise with a great future."

Someone knocked at the door.

"Children, do hurry up and come. Mr. Törzs is getting impatient . . ."

"Hurry up and get dressed," ordered Janos. "And, for goodness' sake don't let him know you were still asleep when he arrived."

"My bath . . ." Baby grumbled faintly.

"No question of a bath. Freshen up your face with some eau-de-Cologne. Come on, hurry up. Very important things depend on the way you behave. And for heaven's sake, be discreet . . ."

Törzs was eating. As a supreme offering, the old mother had brought out the magnificent ham for him.

"It's extremely good," the police officer had just observed as Janos entered the room. Looking up at Janos, he added:

"Is your wife coming?"

"Yes, in one moment . . . I'm glad you like this ham; my niece brought it me from the country."

"Mr. Törzs ought to come and eat with us more often," said his mother blandly. "He's so thin, poor man."

" Call our friend just plain Imre or else Comrade," exclaimed Janos irritably. " You know perfectly well that it's completely out of date to call anyone ' Mr.' "

Baby entered the room, looking ravishing in the pink two-piece that displayed her figure to its utmost advantage. Her eyelids were still puffy from sleep but her smile was enchanting as she held out her hand to Törzs.

" Good morning, my dear Imre. I hear you're taking me off to see some children. What a splendid idea! I adore children; it's our greatest regret that we haven't any ourselves! "

" She's clever, the little slut," thought her mother-in-law. " Considering she loathes children and has never wanted to have any! " She could not help going one better.

" Yes, indeed. It would be so nice to have a little child about the place."

Törzs gave the signal for departure.

" Where would you like me to drop your wife round about one o'clock? " he asked, already at the front door.

" I'll be at the theatre."

" Right. I'll take her there."

Baby ran quickly down the staircase. Her high heels beat a rhythmical tattoo on the steps.

" You can really walk with those things on your feet? " Törzs asked incredulously.

" I'm used to them . . ."

A two-seater super sports car was waiting outside the street door.

The chromium glittered in the sun and the dark green body-work had been so well polished that it gleamed as if it had just come out of the factory.

Baby's heart leapt with joy.

" We're going by car? "

" Of course."

The seats of the car were burning hot from standing in the sun. Baby gave a little shriek.

"I didn't expect the leather to be so hot," she apologised with a smile.

"I ought to have put something over the seat . . ." Törzs pressed the self-starter and the high-powered car glided noiselessly forward. Baby stared at the town like a tourist who had only that moment arrived. Those familiar streets seemed as unreal as if she were passing through them in a dream. She had not driven in a car since 1944. She let herself relax against the padded back of the seat: its warmth and softness made her feel pleasantly drowsy. Her glance shifted to Törzs's hand; the long, lean brown fingers manipulated the steering-wheel with confident expertness. "Has that hand struck people while they were being questioned by the police?" she asked herself . . . Her gaze travelled up from the wrist to the man's neck.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"I was wondering where you managed to get such a suntan."

"In the country."

"Couldn't we stop somewhere? I'm longing for a good strong coffee."

Törzs braked sharply.

"Haven't you had breakfast yet?"

"Of course I have," Baby answered emphatically. "At nine o'clock. Only this heat makes me feel tired."

"We'll have coffee on the way back. We haven't got time now."

They took the road towards Hüvösvolgy. The heat was so oppressive and the air in the streets so heavy that even the draught raised by their speed brought no breath of coolness. Baby fumbled in her handbag for her spectacles and discovered that, in her hurry, she had forgotten them. It was impossible for her to keep her eyes open in the incandescent glare of the sun. Not having had her bath made her feel grubby and she realised that her skirt would be terribly creased for she had tumbled in anyhow on the burning seat and dared not change her position.

They stopped in front of a huge red-brick building. Törzs

jumped out of the car but did not come and open the door to help Baby get out in her turn.

" What a cad," thought Baby, as she caught him up outside the main door.

The moment the bell rang, a woman, dressed all in white, opened the door.

" We are all ready waiting for you, Comrade Lieutenant," she declared, by way of greeting.

They passed down a tiled corridor whose coolness contrasted deliciously with the furnace heat out-of-doors. A muffled sound of children's voices arose on all sides. As they entered the main office, a severe-looking elderly woman came up to them.

" Good morning, Comrade. I am extremely glad that you have come to-day. I want your advice about our home, so as to make sure we're doing good work. It's so much easier to practise self-criticism when someone in authority can point out where one falls short . . . Won't you sit down? "

Törzs lit a cigarette.

" We haven't time to sit down. All the same, before going to the section that particularly interests me, I'd like you to show us all over the home."

Baby was expecting to be introduced to the matron in the severe spectacles. But nothing of the kind happened. They took no more notice of her than if she had been a child brought there as an inmate.

The matron went ahead to show the way.

Törzs grabbed Baby's elbow and pushed her forward.

" Come along . . ."

The police officer's bold gesture at once irritated and reassured her. " He hasn't completely forgotten my presence," she thought. " But how can he allow himself to be so familiar? "

They reached the first floor. Without knocking, the matron walked into a classroom where all the pupils, boys and girls alike, rose to their feet with a single movement.

" Here we have the children of the workers' aristocracy,"

announced the matron. "Their parents are Stakhanovites. As their fathers and mothers work twelve hours a day, the State takes over their place as foster-father. You can naturally understand that the heroes of labour have no time to look after their children!"

Törzs brought out his note-book and a pencil.

"How old are they?"

"The youngest is six and the oldest eight. On account of their parents' merits, I've made little model workshops for them. In them, they find the necessary tools for six different trades. Each one can choose which he prefers—in this way their innate instincts can manifest themselves freely. From the earliest possible age they can direct themselves towards becoming metallurgists or draftsmen or engineers. Some young people who have left my Institute at fourteen have been able to be recruited at once into the city workshops as apprentices. I suppose that is worth mentioning?"

Törzs went on taking notes.

"They look rather pale," he said.

"They will profit by the holiday camps in September," retorted the matron. "At the moment, it's their parents who are taking their summer holiday."

"Why can't they go on holiday at the same time?" Baby risked timidly. She was so unnerved at having raised her voice that her heart began to beat violently.

A severe look from behind the spectacles transfixed her.

"Different generations must not be fettered to each other. Each has the right and the need to relax in the way appropriate to its age. Besides, how can you expect the parents to rest from their fatigue if they are burdened with their children? And how can you expect them to return to their work with new energy if they are not thoroughly rested?"

"Yes, I see," admitted Baby. "Yes, of course."

Standing beside his desk, the schoolmaster broke in on the discussion.

"Would the Comrade Lieutenant like to ask the children any questions?"

Törzs shook his head.

"No. We can move on now."

The children stood there, staring at the group with eyes whose calm expression was too lucid and imperturbable for their age. They were used to being shown off as valuable objects and seemed thoroughly aware of their superiority.

It was only by being shown all over it that Baby realised the extent of the building. The visitors walked through interminable corridors and looked into rooms every sort and kind. Nothing was lacking: classrooms, dormitories, refectory, perfectly-equipped miniature workshops, down to nurseries where nurses in white aprons and masks bent over babies vying with each other in kicking and yelling.

"These are the unmarried mothers' babies," explained the matron. "The offspring of free-love are legalised by the State and taken under its protective wing. The mothers have renounced these children. The Party is their father and I believe they will grow up to be the most active members of the régime. I like this section."

In the kindergarten, they watched the quite tiny ones playing educational games. "Who'll build the biggest factory in coloured cubes?" was to-day's theme. After they had danced round in a ring to a children's song hundreds of years old, they launched into the *Internationale*. These mites of three and four sang shockingly out of tune but they knew every word of the text.

The past is dead: blot out the page.
Arise, ye slaves and burst your thrall!
In the bright dawn of the new age
We who were nothing shall be all.

"*They're* no longer slaves," smiled the matron. "But there are still plenty of territories to be liberated in this world of ours. They will make up the legion of the liberators . . . The only thing

is, we haven't enough hands to help us. I'm constantly asking the Party for help, but the Party is short of staff, too."

"Wouldn't you like to come here and look after the children?" suggested Törzs, turning to Baby.

"I don't think I'd know how to . . . It's a great responsibility to take on . . ." she muttered.

Törzs looked at her without smiling, but his tone was not unfriendly as he replied:

"One can't live without responsibilities . . . But I wasn't seriously suggesting it," he added.

"There's only one last section to visit," said the matron. "That's Group 'Z'."

The children in that room all had a number sewn on the left side of their overalls. Törzs turned over the leaves of his note-book.

"Number 27, which one is that?"

The matron raised her voice.

"27—come here."

A pale little boy with dark hair left the third row. He questioned them with his great dark eyes, ringed with a blueish circle. The matron stroked the small head with a mechanical gesture that owed more to some manual on child-training than to spontaneous tenderness.

"It's this one," she said.

Törzs looked hard at the boy who bore his scrutiny without blinking. His eyes were deep pools lurking in the hollows of rocks; pools that never reflect the sun. They fastened themselves for a long time on Baby, but, though she felt the blood rising in her cheeks, the child remained impassive. It was as if he were resigned never again to warm himself at any source of tenderness, never again to be kissed or cuddled . . . He stared at the young woman as if she were not a living being but simply an object.

"Let's go," said Törzs.

With a brief sigh the matron dismissed Number 27 to his place. Then, when they were outside in the corridor again, she turned to Baby.

"The ones in there," she explained, "they're the children of people who have been executed or who are in prison for political delinquency or subversive activities. They no longer have a family. We have given them numbers so as not to have to use names that the Party and the Law have had to erase from the community. It's all to the advantage of these children for it prevents them from having guilt-complexes. Anyhow, this number is only provisional. Later on, they will be given another name. Thus we offer even the children of traitors to their country the chance to begin life with a clean sheet. Naturally we take most particular care about their moral and intellectual readaptation. Often we have to fight against extremely strange atavistic tendencies or a family training that it is difficult to make them forget. It's hard, but immensely worth while . . ."

There was such a lump in Baby's throat that she wondered whether she would be able to utter a sound.

She made the attempt.

"What's that little boy's name?" she asked Törzs, very low. "Or, at least, what was his name?"

The police officer gave her a sidelong look.

"It's better for the child that no one should ever pronounce that name again—better for you, too," answered Törzs dryly. Then he launched into a long discussion with the matron. Baby, a little distance away from them, tried to overhear a few sentences. But she was so preoccupied that she could not understand anything of what was being said in undertones.

At long last they left the building. This time, the car, which had been parked in the shade, was quite cool.

"It's splendid," declared Baby. "That building's marvellous and the system they use there, too. I'm really awfully glad you took me to see it all. There's no question about it . . . it's a good thing we've got communism here at last. Janos has been enthusiastic right from the very beginning and I'm beginning to be nearly as enthusiastic as he is."

Törzs did not reply; his attention appeared to be entirely

concentrated on the road. Baby had the feeling that she ought to have said something different—something deep and sincere—a remark that would have made a better impression. She seemed to have done more harm than good with her puerile words. Ought she to have said something about the name she so unfortunately shared with that man who had just been hanged? Yes, she must mention him. She began to construct fine phrases on the subject of the dead man but, just as she was about to bring them out, her lips were paralysed by the fear of making some blunder.

The quarter they were driving through was where the big villas stood. At this moment it was drowsing in the noonday heat for everyone had taken refuge in the shade. For no apparent reason, Törzs suddenly slowed down and stopped.

Baby turned towards him in surprise.

"What's wrong?"

By way of answer, the man bent over her and kissed her. His dazzling, carnivorous teeth bit into her loosely-closed lips. Taken unawares, she did not even defend herself, though she was vividly conscious of what was happening. It was not till Törzs's lean fingers slid down from her shoulder to her breasts that she tried to free herself and uttered a small, inarticulate cry. The movement she made to struggle out of his embrace only flung her farther forward into the man's powerful arms. Half horrified, half thrilled, she was aware of a shaming prick of desire; she opened her lips. After a moment, the man let her go, lit a cigarette and started up the engine again.

A few minutes later, they were in the centre of the town, near the big theatre in which the Lyric Opera had been allowed to have an auditorium and an office. This time, Törzs opened the door of the car for Baby, but did not get out himself. He consulted his wrist watch.

"I haven't time to come in. Tell Janos I invite you both to the 'Troika.' I'll be there at nine to-night."

"Right," said Baby. "I'll tell him."

Now that the spell was broken, she would have liked to protest

against the kiss she had accepted like an accomplice and to refuse the invitation with disdain. But she was hungry, she was tired to death, and most of all, she was frightened of annoying the police officer. She held out her hand to him and managed to summon up enough strength to give him a vague smile.

" Till to-night, then . . ."

The car disappeared so quickly that Baby, left rooted to the spot on the edge of the pavement, wondered, for a moment, whether she had not dreamt the whole thing.

7

THE LUXURY "Espresso" bar known as the "Troika" was situated in a narrow passage in the aristocratic residential part of Buda. It camouflaged itself among the venerable façades which had been more or less spared by the bombardment.

This Espresso had opened its doors the day after the siege of the city. The sun was still putrefying the corpses that lay scattered all about when elegant women with varnished nails began to serve coffee there. Very soon, there were plenty of customers. The sweetish smell of decomposing bodies mingled with the fragrance of black-market coffee and the radio announced, between the two waltz tunes, the lists of those condemned to death during the day.

The proprietress of the Espresso belonged to one of the noblest families in Hungary. Her father had been deported by the Germans and her mother had died during the siege. She herself had remained alone in her private house—a building in the purest Baroque style —that had been damaged by several bombs.

She was a divorcée of thirty-six; intelligent and extremely beautiful. She knew that the régime which prided itself on its political puritanism, would sweep her away mercilessly on account of her historic name, if she did not promptly harness herself to some activity.

After the Russian army's pillaging, which had been authorised for twenty-four hours but had, in fact, gone on for weeks, she had few possessions left. There remained a certain amount of silver and some dinner services of fine porcelain that had been carefully hidden

away. So the young countess transformed the great drawing-room into a tea-room and went off to find three women friends to act as waitresses. Each of them brought a few objects saved from the catastrophe. Thus it came about that the customers drank their tea from Sèvres cups and stirred their sugar with little crested spoons or sipped their coffee from mugs of Rosenthal china. The little tables were covered with real lace, taken from the shelves of glass-fronted marqueterie cabinets that had been looted of their treasures and smashed.

Later, as the Espresso was going well, they served a plate of cold meat as a one-course dinner. For this, the tables were covered with white damask cloths, other relics of former splendour. The great coronoted monograms assorted oddly with the worn, muddy shoes of the diners. At first the *bistro* bore the seductive name of "Blue Venice" and that name alone was enough to draw the crowd. People went there simply to pronouce the magic word Venice and to dream of Mediterranean skies, of escape. . . .

Budapest, in those days, was like a condemned man enjoying a brief reprieve and flinging himself frantically into any pleasure, not knowing whether or not he had another day to live.

No one was sure of the morrow: people walking in the streets would be suddenly requisitioned for forced labour and disappear for ever. One could be buried under the ruins of a bombed house when the wind dislodged the tottering masonry; one could step on an unexploded mine hidden under a heap of ordure. A malicious denunciation could plunge one into the bottomless depths of arraignment by the political police. In the whole memory of man, there had never been a time when so many snares were set for the mere man in the street who thought himself safe because he was so insignificant.

In 1945-6, merely to survive needed nothing short of heroism.

In order not to die of hunger, the best thing was to go out into the country where one could barter any objects one had managed to save, for food.

The trains were crammed with soldiers: the civilians had to

climb on the roofs of coaches or cling to the steps and the buffers. The peasants, heavily fleeced themselves, turned into petty dictators. For a kilo of flour, the townsman had to give the last shirt off his back: a piano was reckoned as the price of a ham.

It was also the first time that the private individual found himself confronted with a régime that kept a detailed account of every career, however insignificant.

If the accused declared, protesting his innocence:

"I assure you, I did nothing whatever under the German occupation . . ." the question came back: "Why did you do nothing?"

Money devaluated from day to day—or rather from hour to hour. Prices shot up dizzily: very soon a cup of black coffee cost 100,000 *pengos* at the countess's establishment. Before the war, it had cost less than one *pengo*.

The most humble people, lured by bad example, took to pillaging like the rest. The mania for collecting took hold of simple souls who had hitherto been extremely honest; they cheerfully entered deserted houses and carried off anything they fancied. Objects began to circulate from hand to hand. A Russian soldier took the wrist-watch from an arm still wearing a shred of German uniform —the explosion had flung it a long way from the corpse to which it belonged—and a respectable citizen allotted himself the wedding ring. The cramped little rooms belonging to the prostitutes became positive emporiums, for their clients brought the most heterogeneous things. Food, saucepans, precious objects of all kinds made their way there with the same regularity as the customers. Money was no longer accepted as currency.

At the lowest depths of the moral and economic collapse of post-war Budapest, of the utter despair of all who dared to stop to think, the name "Blue Venice" had been like a magic password, an Open Sesame to a world that seemed lost for ever. But, towards the end of 1946, a decree forbade all public establishments, cafés, bars and cinemas, to bear a foreign name with Western, i.e. decadent associations. The countess was no fool; she understood that a new name was a vital necessity and she rechristened her

Espresso the "Troika." This name, suggesting a romantic sledge flying across the snowy steppes of Russia in the days of the Czars was certainly far more foreign to Hungarians than "Blue Venice." But it was a homage to their great Eastern neighbour and the name as well received in high quarters.

The proprietress thought up new improvements: she served alcoholic drinks at night and she engaged a singer.

Soon after nine o'clock, the tables were pushed back to leave an open space in the middle of the room and a former professor of the Academy of Music, who had been dismissed by the new régime, seated himself at the piano. His grey head bent closely over the keys; he read the music of popular songs with considerable difficulty for his fingers, accustomed to play Bach and Mozart, were ill-adapted to jazz rhythms. He was as much out of place in the new era as the fine porcelain and the damask cloths, but, as he was infinitely lucky not to be interned for being an unemployed intellectual, he banged the keyboard conscientiously.

In her heart, the countess despised the beautiful cabaret singer but she always behaved towards her with the utmost affability. She knew that this red-haired, full-breasted Jewess attracted customers as a magnet attracts pins.

The singer was called Agi. Her luscious beauty was like that of a full-blown lotus floating on a dark lake. Two rows of impeccable teeth gleamed every time she gave her full-throated laugh; her slightly aquiline nose arched proudly above her fleshy lips. The dark glitter of her eyes reflected such intense enjoyment of life that she seemed to belong to the days of Marie Antoinette and to be playing at shepherdesses among her beribboned sheep.

The neighbouring ruins did not damp her cheerfulness in the least; she strode gaily over the corpses in her little high-heeled shoes. She shared herself out so ingenuously among all the men who flocked round her that she seemed to be apologising to them for not being able to give herself entirely to each one at the same time. Under the German occupation she had not trembled, like her co-religionists, under the constant menace of

deportation: she had retained her unshakeable confidence in her good luck.

At that particular time, she used to wear tight black skirts and dark sweaters that clung revealingly to her shape. She had sewn the famous yellow star that all Jews had to wear on the provocative tip of her left breast.

Nevertheless, Agi was not, strictly speaking, a prostitute; she did not sell herself but gave herself for love. The only thing was that her feelings were as inflammable as they were fickle. Agi did not greatly appreciate either the marmoreal beauty and virtue of her employer, the countess, or the faintly condescending familiarity of the high-born waitresses whose names she knew from the pre-war society gossip columns. She remembered one front page photograph of the countess in a glossy magazine, wearing a historic Hungarian costume, embroidered all over in white on white.

Agi's magical success lay in the fact that, whatever she sang, she felt intensely. The trivial words of the songs melted on her lips like wax in the sun. An invincible gaiety radiated from her entire being.

It was at this overflowing vitality that Arpad Klein warmed himself when his neurotic compulsions took him to the Troika. Having overcome his initial crisis of jealousy, he had grown used to the idea that, in Agi's eyes, every man was a mine of emotions for her to prospect. He was satisfied with the present of a night with her that she made him from time to time. The next morning he nearly always woke up feeling tender and sentimental and shed tears all down her lovely white arms. Agi loathed being woken up like this at dawn but she did not protest. She saw this man as a grown-up child who must be petted and comforted because life had wounded him. Among the complex feelings that existed in Agi's heart, the one that bound her to Klein was affectionate pity. And, for her, that was by no means the frailest of bonds.

How many times Arpad Klein had exposed his most personal problems to her! Agi knew them all by heart. He would talk,

almost in a whisper, with his lips against the warm-hearted young woman's ear.

"Something very peculiar has happened to me," he would say for the hundredth time. "Don't be cross with me, I know I've often talked to you about my troubles. But I tell myself that, by talking about them, I shall eventually discover what it is that has shaken me to the core. After all, I'm not the only one to have had myself baptised to save my life—hundreds of other Israelites were doing it all round me. It was only the merest formality. With the priest's certificate and a bit of luck, one escaped being deported. Have I told you before about Grün, that chap who started up a Baptism Agency towards the end of 1944, and made himself a small fortune forging certificates? And about that Catholic priest who used to give people the precious documents out of pity and who got deported instead of them when the Gestapo got wind of what he was up to?

"But *I* was really baptised, in a real church. I'll never forget that day. Before going in, I looked up and I noticed the sky was a milky white—there wasn't any sun, but it wasn't raining, either. No . . . don't get impatient . . . listen carefully. Perhaps, between the two of us, we can penetrate the mystery.

"I went into the sacristy where a shrivelled-up little man was just taking off the priest's vestments. I had the feeling I was spying on something that was none of my business and I felt decidedly embarrassed. They came and asked me who I was, and after a short wait, the sacristan—he'd left me on my own—came back with the old priest who'd already dealt with me. Probably he dealt with all the others who wanted to get themselves baptised. He hadn't had time to explain much to me. And, though I'd made an effort to give an outward appearance of good faith, I hadn't paid much attention to what he said. All I cared about, you see, was to get through all these rites and formalities as quickly as possible. We went up to a granite basin filled with Holy Water and the sacristan put his hand on my shoulder—he was acting as my Godfather. The priest began by asking me in his quavering voice:

"'Do you believe in God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth?'

"'I believe,' I answered firmly. And up to then, there'd been nothing wrong because my own religion had taught me that too.

"'Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, who was born and suffered for us?'

"I answered: 'I believe,' but in a troubled voice because I could feel myself flushing.

"'Do you believe in the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church?' asked the priest, and he enumerated a list of Christian dogmas.

"'I believe,' I said—much too loud because I was so agitated. Because what had seemed to me up till then a mere formality suddenly looked to me like deception and I was terribly shaken by this. My voice rang out arrogantly all over the quiet, little chapel.

"'Do you desire baptism?'

"'I desire it.'

"Then he sprinkled me with Holy Water, saying:

"'I baptise thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.' The water ran off my forehead right down my chin and I didn't dare wipe it off. In the sacristy I got my Baptismal certificate and the priest gave me a little homily.

"'My son,' he said, taking off his spectacles and slowly wiping them. 'Do not forget that, during these few moments, your soul has been purified of original sin and of all the sins you have committed since you were born. Therefore, go in peace.'

"I folded up the Baptismal certificate, put it in my pocket and went off, idiotically saying 'Good morning' to him, just like someone coming out of a shop where they've bought something. In the church porch, I took my handkerchief out of my pocket to see if the Holy Water had left any trace. 'Nothing's changed . . . everything's as it should be,' I said to myself. But when I walked down the steps into the street, I felt as if the asphalt were going soft under my feet. No, I wasn't suffering from nerves, wait while

I explain. It wasn't only the ground that seemed softer—everything seemed slightly different. The tram was yellower. People's features looked more clearly defined. I didn't feel the same any more, either towards people or towards objects. I know that, when I tell it, it all sounds ridiculous. But, at the time, I was positively hallucinated. I felt I ought to pay attention to every word and every action so as not to destroy the extraordinary state my soul was in.

"I got so irritated by this peculiar complex that I wanted to get rid of it. So I went into a *bistro* and drank a cup of strong coffee. Then I went home. But even there the spell wasn't broken. My room and everything in it looked as unfamilar to me as a room in a hotel . . . What you've got to understand is that, though I hadn't really become a Christian, I felt cut off from my old beliefs. It was as if I'd gone to the end of a jetty to look at the sea and, while I was looking at it, the dyke had collapsed behind me, leaving me marooned on a block of concrete, face to face with the infinite."

It was always round about this point of Klein's lucubrations that Agi could no longer quite hide her impatience and broke in:

"You ought to consult a nerve specialist. It's your nerves that are all to bits."

"The most astonishing thing of all," Arpad would continue, without even being aware of the interruption, "is that, ever since that ceremony, I've stopped being afraid of deportation. Not because the Baptismal certificate protects me, but from a kind of detachment in the face of danger. It's quite likely I should have howled with terror if I'd been arrested—I simply don't know. But, in principle, I was indifferent to danger. I suppose a diver held down under the water by the weight of his apparatus, but knowing he had an inexhaustible supply of oxygen, might feel like that. He'd observe the underwater world through his glass helmet with the same careless detachment."

"Neurotic," Agi would repeat obstinately.

Then she would go off into the bathroom and plunge into her

bath as if to rid herself of her sleepiness, the memory of Klein and all other problems.

Klein would remain sitting on the bed, perplexed. He asked himself how many times he had retold this story, scene by scene, like a jeweller rethreading pearls one by one and each time discovering that his necklace is incomplete. *Where was the gap?* And how, how could one explain the fantastic condition of a man of thirty, going up the steps of a church and coming down them soon afterwards into the street with a new soul and a new life, acquired just five minutes ago?

After those strange nights when Klein had poured out his heart, he went to the Troika more eagerly than ever in the evening and gazed at Agi with eyes full of mingled tenderness and lust. The wine warmed his frozen heart and he felt as calm and carefree as if these dark and cruel times had not got him in their clutches.

Exactly at nine o'clock, Baby and Janos made their appearance at the Troika. After the exhausting visit to the educational institution, Baby had slept the entire afternoon. A hot bath had restored the pearly transparency of her skin and she had changed into a pale mauve two-piece.

With it she wore only a single string of pearls; her golden hair was brushed very flat and clung round her head in smooth, supple waves. Janos, in a linen suit crumpled from two weeks' continuous wear, looked far more typical of the period they were living in.

"Look, there's Arpad," Baby whispered to him, as they looked about for an empty table.

"I hope to goodness he doesn't notice us," answered the conductor. "If he does, he's only too likely to come over to our table and ruin our conversation with Imre."

He pronounced the name like that of an old friend.

They sat down at a table that stood a little apart from the others. Baby ordered an orange juice and Janos a glass of wine.

The longer they waited, the more irritable and on edge Janos became.

"What *really* happened this morning?" he asked his wife, leaning across the table.

"I've told you ten times already. How many more times do you want me to tell you?"

"But you've said nothing about *him* . . . Was he nice to you?"

"Who are you talking about?"

"Imre, of course . . ."

"Törzs doesn't know how to be 'nice'," Baby said crossly.

She was fingering her pearls as if she were telling over the memories of a few hours ago.

Janos became impatient.

"*That's* not what I mean . . . But, from one point of view, what do you think he thinks of *us*?"

"I don't think he has any opinion about us," she answered, putting the glass to her lips. Then she turned the ashtray upside down and studied the mark on the porcelain. "*Meissen*," she said, "Pretty." And she lit a cigarette.

Suddenly, the room was darkened, leaving only three small electric bulbs shining in the dimness. Agi, the singer, made her appearance in the centre of the circle that had been cleared and her warm voice broke into a little song. It broke into it so softly that she seemed to be continuing aloud something that was already running in the heads of everyone in her audience.

If I'm to be happy, it all depends on you
Otherwise I'll lie awake and cry the long nights through . . .

Janos was breathing hard; his fat fingers drummed on the table.

"You're much too elegant," he said succinctly. "I've told you so a hundred times and you still don't take it in. You look as if you'd come out of a dress-show of the latest Western fashions. What impression do you suppose that's going to make on Törzs?"

"The best possible," she insisted dryly. "Törzs isn't only a police officer, he's also a man."

"Exactly what do you mean by that?" exclaimed Janos.

"Nothing very original—merely that men aren't remotely interested in women who don't care what they look like and dress in rags . . ."

Agi's sombre, husky voice flowed over them, subduing them to its spell.

One cold word from you is like a red-hot dart,
Even if you only want to break my tortured heart,
I'll find a way to smile at everything . . .

"Liberty, comrades!" announced the voice of Törzs. And, before they had had time to acknowledge his appearance, the young Commissar was already seated at their table between the two of them.

"Liberty," murmured Baby, almost singing the word.

"Liberty!" exclaimed Janos, terrified at the idea that the police officer might have overheard their conversation. His nerves were on edge. And, as if that were not enough, he was conscious of burning pains in his stomach. Capricious shadows kept shifting all about them as the lighting constantly changed in colouring and intensity. Baby noticed the close-set bluish bristles that had already begun to grow again on Törzs's chin.

"A coffee," he said to the elegant waitress who had approached their table.

His hand brushed against Baby's. The young woman fluttered as if she had been expecting this signal. She tried to catch Törzs's eye but his look met hers with such complete indifference that it was obvious he had only touched her by accident.

"I've some news for you," he said to Janos. "You'll get the subsidy you asked for, but on one condition . . ."

Janos and Baby drew closer to Törzs so as to hear better; their smiles had become fixed and strained with curiosity.

At that moment a storm of applause rocked the entire room. Agi had just finished her number, and, to thank her audience, had flung out her white arms as if to embrace the whole of her public. At a slight sign from her, the pianist struck a chord in B flat; a chord

full of bitterness. Agi's features became set; she clasped her hands just above the top of her low-cut dress and this gesture calmed down the seething sensuality of the atmosphere as effectively as if she had donned a great black cloak. She launched into the sorrowful song of the Jewish mother who had been torn away from her family and killed. This tragic *récitatif*, steeped in the sadness of the ghetto, was as popular throughout Central Europe at that time as *Lili Marlene* had been at the height of the war when the radios of Belgrade and Berlin alike had plugged it interminably. The *YiddisherMamma* evoked the tragedy of the Jewish population but it was their own sorrow that all the enslaved peoples of Central Europe mourned under cover of that song. The tears spurted from Agi's beautiful eyes. The pianist, too, was deeply moved; after the siege, his two brothers had been requisitioned for a job supposed to last an hour and had never returned from it.

The song was reaching its culminating point, and in a long drawn-out sob, Agi's voice evoked the old woman of seventy, shut up in the cattle-truck that was carrying her to certain death.

A shudder of horror ran through Baby: it seemed to her that a ghost had brushed against her: Jenö . . . She had recognised his casual grace, and his elegant gestures. But his head hung over his shoulder in an odd way—as in the photograph.

The countess remained perfectly still behind her cashier's desk and hid her cares under an expressionless mask. She was telling herself that next week she would have to go into a clinic to try a new cure.

During the siege of Budapest she had been raped in the open street by the soldiers.

This time they reckoned to cure her syphilis with injections of milk. But would her already overstrained heart survive this treatment?

Agi ended her song: the public deeply moved, gave her an ovation. Törzs observed this scene with his face screwed up.

"It's a demonstration," he said harshly. "This song will have to be forbidden."

"Personally," said Janos, "I'm in process of composing my *Joy of Liberation* symphony."

He waited anxiously for comment.

Törzs lit a cigarette.

"Yes. The condition I mentioned just now, Comrade Conductor, is that you'll have to change your surname."

He avoided calling Janos by his Christian name as if to underline the fact that what he had just said was not a personal remark but emanated from the official authorities.

"My name?" stammered Janos, his eyes glassy.

"Yes, your name. That reactionary name which summons up the corruption of the past and affronts the feelings of the workers. How could you direct a progressive theatre with that dead weight hanging round your neck? Do you want to arouse the fury of the masses by printing your name on the play-bills—the name you have in common with your Nazi of a cousin, that man who has so recently received his just punishment?"

"No one is responsible for his relatives," Janos mumbled in confusion. "I was the first to condemn his actions . . ."

"Each one is responsible for all. We're past the days of hedging and facile excuses. But perhaps you're particularly attached to this outworn name of yours?"

"No, no," Janos insisted vehemently. "I'm not particularly attached to it . . . As a matter of fact, Imre, you're absolutely right. I blame myself for not having thought of it myself."

He felt as much shame as if he had said: "I renounce my manhood; I'm ready to become a toadying eunuch provided I'm left in peace and no one hurts me."

Törzs went on:

"Choose a pleasant, modest name that people will come to know and like. By doing that, you'll have formally broken with your compromising past."

"But *I've* done nothing, personally . . ." Janos protested timidly.

"You were reactionary in a negative way, without meaning

to be. This old name and this cousin of yours contaminate you without your realising it. You've got to rid yourself of all that if you want to be a constructive element and not a spoke in the wheel of the people's democracy."

"Yes, I see . . . you're dead right. Very well, then, I'll change my name and then I'll write my *Joyous Symphony*. The symphony of the great universal joy that has come to us all, brought by the arms of Russia . . . the dazzling, overflowing joy of the Liberation. . . ."

It was at breakfast next morning that Janos's mother was informed of the discussion to change the family surname. The old woman was already dressed; her silvery hair rolled up on the nape of her neck in an impeccably neat bun.

"She certainly hasn't washed," thought Baby, staring at the greasy skin of the flabby, wrinkled cheeks. Janos was repeating the same statement for the second time.

"He told me that we must definitely change our name. Do you understand, Mother?"

With the bread-knife motionless in her hand, the old woman stood as if petrified. It was difficult for her to take in the sense of the words she had heard spoken.

"What?" she asked hoarsely. "What's that you're saying about our name?"

"That we've got to change it," murmured Baby, only just managing to suppress a malicious smile.

"What does all this mean, my boy?" asked the mother, beginning to tremble. Her eyes sought the eyes of her son, as if to implore his protection.

Exasperated, he spoke to her harshly.

"Put that knife down, Mamma. I can't stand seeing you brandishing it like that. And do stop trembling, it's perfectly absurd. Törzs told us yesterday at the Troika that, to get the subsidy, we'll have to change our name."

Mamma put down the knife and clutched the edge of the table.

Her sudden movement made the table shake and Baby's coffee spilled over into the saucer.

"I don't understand," muttered the old woman, her cheeks blazing. "This name is three hundred years old and I want to die bearing it. I want it engraved on my tombstone . . ."

Baby was frankly surprised that her husband showed not the least sign of softening.

"This name is a rope round our necks," he declared, more exasperated than ever. "It's Jenö's fault—he's the one who so fatally compromised it."

"Poor Jenö, can't you leave him in peace?" Baby would have liked to say, but she thought it wiser to hold her tongue.

"But what will happen to us now, Janos dear?" twittered the old woman. "What shall we do?"

"We shall choose a thoroughly neutral name that can be safely presented to the people, that won't be a jab in the eye to anyone who stops to read the play-bills . . . a name the great public will easily get accustomed to . . ."

"And you think that *then* they'll leave us in peace?" inquired the old woman.

Janos was almost beside himself with nervous agitation.

"After all, they've done nothing to us up to now. What can they possibly have against me? I'm a Party member . . . On the contrary, I've got the impression they want to push me—after all, they need talent. The Lyric Opera is something that suits the public of to-day extremely well. A workman will certainly prefer Mozart's *Flight from the Seraglio* to a Wagner opera that lasts for hours. I'm also planning to organise tours in the provinces. I shall found a travelling Lyric Opera. They'll give me all the money I need for it . . . they'll back me. So it's perfectly natural they should expect me to co-operate and be adaptable . . ."

"How terrified he must be," thought Baby, "to give us all those explanations!" But she was content to go on smoking in silence.

"And where are we going to find it, this new name?"

" That's not the problem. Anywhere."

He shrugged his shoulders and made an evasive gesture.

" We need a name that falls in with the current political trend. A name that simultaneously symbolises work and productivity."

Mamma spoke aloud the thought that had crossed her mind:

" I'm curious to see the *concierge's* face when he's told all this."

" You can set your mind at rest. The party will put him in the picture quicker than you think. I've told you over and over again not to look on this man as a pre-war *concierge*. Every single week, he makes a detailed report to the Party about all the tenants and everyone who sets foot in the building."

" He can always take note of Törzs's visits," mocked Baby. " That certainly won't do us any harm! "

Janos suddenly put down the cup of coffee he was just about to drink from.

" Whatever's the matter with Ida? " he asked.

" I've already been into her room," said his mother ruminatively. " I took her her breakfast in bed because she's quite feverish. It would be better if she stayed in bed; she must have caught cold. I gave her a book to help pass the time."

" The child doesn't put us out in the least," said Janos, rising from his chair. " All the same, it would be better if she went back home."

He moved off towards the bathroom.

His mother protested with unaccustomed vehemence:

" That's impossible: she came to spend three weeks with us and she's only been here a few days. She's promised to send us some nuts and grapes this autumn. And she's also proposing we should have the benefit of some of the ducklings they're going to fatten up for October."

" October," muttered Janos. " October's still a long way off . . . Mamma, will you put out a shirt for me, a white one if there's one clean. What about you, Baby? What do you propose to do to-day? "

His wife's thoughts had wandered away to such distant possi-

bilities that she started as if she had been caught doing something wrong.

"I'm going to see a doctor about my headaches."

"Are you going to Keleman?"

"Yes."

"About what time?"

"He's expecting me at six."

"It's the cigarettes," said Mamma, with a touch of malice in her voice. "That's what gives you your migraines. All that smoke—it gives me migraines too even though *I* don't smoke . . ."

"Keleman will forbid her to smoke, if that's what causes them," broke in Janos.

He was on the point of shutting the door again but suddenly he changed his mind and called to his wife:

"Come here, please, Baby. I want to ask you something."

She stood up and followed him into the bathroom. Janos was fussing round the hot tap; he wanted the noise of the running water to cover their voices. Baby shut the door and leant back against it, surprised.

"What do you want me for?" she demanded.

Janos loomed up in front of her in all his threatening bulk, his pyjama jacket gaping over his fat, white chest.

"Why didn't you come into my room this morning? I asked you last night to come and see me this morning. It's ten days now that you've shut yourself away like this. What's the meaning of it?"

Baby's glance slid from Janos's shoulder towards the mirror that reflected her own face. But the steam from the water misted the glass and her features vanished, little by little, in the fog.

"I was tired," she muttered very low.

Janos's face hardened.

"It's spiteful of you," he hissed between his teeth. "You're abusing the fact that you have a room to yourself. So you'll have to come back and sleep with me again . . ."

"You snore," replied Baby. There was such repugnance in her voice that Janos shuddered at it. "You snore so loud that it's

impossible to sleep beside you. Even you can hardly go as far as insisting that I spend my nights sitting up in bed staring into the dark?"

The man would have liked to find a decisive answer: decisive not only in words but still more in the profoundly significant way in which they were uttered. But he could find none. He caught his wife by the shoulder and his hand slid down to her breast.

"Naughty," he said impatiently. "Naughty little thing . . ."

Baby remained inert and observed coldly:

"The bath will overflow in a moment . . ."

Janos swung round to turn off the tap and she profited by this to make her escape. As she came out, she nearly knocked down her mother-in-law.

"Were you listening at the keyhole, Mamma?" she asked with seeming calmness. "You'd do better to think over the name we're to choose. That would be a more useful occupation."

As she passed by the old woman, she felt like giving her a little slap, as if by accident, just for the pleasure of it. But the idea of touching her, even by stealth, filled her with disgust. A sudden decision made her go into Ida's room. The girl was lying face down on her bed, reading. She shut the book as soon as she saw her aunt.

"Listen," said Baby, seating herself on the edge of the bed. "Wouldn't you like a new summer frock? I've got a very pretty one in a pale green printed material. As I've got thinner, it's too big for me now, but I think it should be just your size. I'll give it to you, if you like."

Ida was so overcome by the unexpected appearance of her aunt and by her generous offer that she could only stammer:

"Yes, thank you very much, it's awfully nice of you . . ."

"Come with me. We'll go and try it on at once."

Ida quickly slipped on her dressing-gown and followed her aunt. Baby's bedroom was already flooded with sunshine. Ida fell in love with the dress the moment she saw it.

"It's perfect," she declared, as she tried it on in front of the glass. "Absolutely perfect . . ."

White flowers were scattered on the water-green ground as if a careless hand had let them fall from a fragrant bunch. The heart-shaped neckline showed a generous expanse of Ida's amber-coloured skin.

"This is the dress I'll wear to the St. Anna's ball—if there *is* one this year." And it seemed to her she could feel Marton's arm round her waist.

"She really is pretty," thought Baby, studying the girl. "She's almost beautiful." Then, suddenly, she told herself crossly she could perfectly well have worn that dress once or twice more.

Ida returned to her room with the frock and Baby got dressed. She studied her features at length in the glass, as if she had to appear on the stage. Then she took out of her wardrobe a dress of salmon-coloured linen, a dress she preferred to every other on account of its associations. Each time she put it on, Baby relived a particular moment of her existence.

When the family had at last left the cellar where it had gone to earth during the siege, Baby discovered she had nothing left to wear except the practical, but inelegant clothes she had taken with her into the shelter. They had not a penny and were in terror of being swept away by the great current of purges on account of their already suspect name. Their flat had been devastated; the blast from the bombs had reduced doors and windows to dust. The roof had collapsed in the main rooms; only the kitchen, the hall and the maid's room had remained almost intact. When they brought up their beds from the cellar, it was in these they installed themselves as best they could. Then Janos had circumspectly begun his task of approaching the Communist Party. From the political angle, his contribution was completely negative, but, all the same, his application was accepted. When he left the Party headquarters, card in hand, he felt as if he had publicly assassinated someone; subsequently his friends and acquaintances studiously avoided mentioning this fact which scarcely enhanced their admiration for him. Janos frequently absented himself from his home. One day, he announced to his family that they would soon have a new place to live in. The

two women bombarded him with questions but he avoided answering them, hinting that he was dealing with matters too important to be confided to the weaker sex with their reputation for indiscreet chatter. The new flat was situated in the smartest residential part of Pest, a few minutes' walk from the great building that houses the Ministry of National Security. The owners of this completely empty flat must have been well-off people: heavy velvet curtains still hung at the windows, miraculously spared by the bombs and the looters.

"Who used to live here, son?" Janos's mother had asked on their first visit to this flat whose history she would have liked to know.

Janos made an evasive gesture.

"That's of no importance and it's no business of ours."

Mamma looked at him in silence for a moment. Then she asked hesitantly:

"Are they dead?"

Scarlet with rage, Janos replied:

"How should *I* know . . .? They went off to the West before the siege. How d'you expect me to know whether they're dead or alive?"

The old woman was obstinate.

"If they came back, would we have to leave the flat?"

"If they came back, they'd be hanged because they're war criminals. Now, are you satisfied?"

"Then everything's all right, we've nothing to worry about," said his mother contentedly.

Baby had not accompanied them. She had found an excuse to stay at home because she wanted a chance to hunt through her mother-in-law's personal belongings. The black fichus, the missal and the rosary were of no interest to her and she was just going to shut the cupboard when her fingers encountered the little silk bag her mother-in-law had kept round her neck all through their stay in the cellar.

The first thing she pulled out of it was a heavy gold watch, meant

to be worn on a chain. The watch had stopped. Inside the cover was a yellowed photograph of a bearded and moustached gentleman in a stiff collar. It was her father-in-law whom she had never known. The young woman hastily shut the watch, imprisoning the dead man once more against the stopped hands on the dial, and snatched up the chain with feverish, shaking fingers. She had never seen so long a chain—a good four yards of gold. Baby took a pair of scissor and cut off at least eight inches; it had never occurred to her that a gold chain would offer no more resistance than a piece of common cardboard! Then she put everything back in its place and waited for the others to return.

No mention was ever made of the theft but the old woman was as well aware of what had happened as if she had seen the whole thing with her own eyes. She blamed herself for having deserted her treasure, even for an instant. But, at that particular time, Budapest had once more become a city where locks were of some use and it had never occurred to the old woman that there might be a thief inside the house.

Baby had no difficulty in finding a tailor who was willing to take the stolen gold in exchange for a complete trousseau, thus making an excellent bargain. Nevertheless, to cover up her ruse, she nagged her husband till he gave her some money to buy clothes. As paper money devalued almost from hour to hour, Baby did not feel much regret at throwing the bundles of notes down the lavatory of an Espresso bar. This episode in her life recurred to her mind every time she put on the pink dress, as she was doing to-day.

About eleven o'clock, the door-bell pealed. The old woman displayed no surprise when she found Törzs on the landing.

"Good morning," said the police officer. "Who's at home?"

"Only Baby. But do come in, she'll be delighted to see you. Come this way—you have to go through my room to get to hers."

Törzs hesitated a moment outside Baby's door: then he knocked.

"Come in," she said.

The old woman lay down on her bed and tried to hear what was going on on the other side of the wall, but her own heavy breathing made the task difficult. "There!" she thought with satisfaction. "Now my darling son will realise at last the sort of creature he's married: a woman who opens her door to the first comer." The mother-in-law was boiling over with hate but also with resentment, for she knew that, at this moment, they both needed Baby. The shining gold of her hair was a trump card that constituted a solid protection of the red card of the Party member. . . .

During this time, Baby had been looking Törzs straight in the eye. . . .

"Why have you come?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I was passing this way . . ."

In his ill-cut suit and his open-necked white shirt, the man looked even more emaciated than usual.

"Let's get out of here," whispered Baby, "let's go into the dining-room."

He pulled an exceedingly crumpled packet of cigarettes out of his pocket.

"You certainly don't smoke these," he said, without stressing the words. "These are proletarian cigarettes. Too strong for you."

The young woman did not reply: a sudden inspiration had put her in a good temper. The year before, Janos had been given a silver cigarette case by a friend who did not know he was a non-smoker. The friend had been duly thanked and, without letting the old woman forestall her, Baby had hidden the case in her chest of drawers. She pulled out the drawer, slid her hand under a pile of underclothes and held out the case to Törzs.

"Take it," she said, "I give it to you."

The man took the object without a word, weighed it on his hand for a moment, then threw it on the divan and smiled.

"I don't want it," he said in a faintly mocking voice. "The cigarettes I smoke don't go well with a silver case. I've no

use for presents; they don't impress me. You can tell Janos that."

Baby's cheeks were crimson. She could have screamed at herself for having made such a blunder.

"But he knows nothing about it," she stammered. "I just this moment thought of it when I saw you hadn't a cigarette case . . ."

"You shouldn't distribute presents in such a hurry," he said. "Put that thing back in the drawer—it's the best place for it."

He stubbed out his cigarette in an ash-tray on the bedside table and prepared to take his departure.

"I'll come and collect you one day next week," he said. "Have you thought over this change of name yet?"

"Of course we have," Baby answered like an automaton. "Janos is extremely pleased to get rid of everything that connects him with the past."

For a moment she did not feel as if she had said anything really convincing. The harder she tried to make an impression on Törzs, the more detached and distant he seemed. She had the feeling that this man had been in her room for hours and that extremely important things were involved but she could not grasp their implications. Törzs came up close to her, so close, that, for a second, she thought he was going to kiss her, but he contented himself with saying:

"One of these days, I'll walk right in here . . ."

Then he turned on his heels and left her, almost without saying good-bye. Baby waited till she heard the front door bang before going through into her mother-in-law's room and saying angrily:

"Another time, Mamma, you might have the decency not to thrust people on me like that. What's the meaning of all this? Why did you send that man into my bedroom?"

The old woman gave her a provoking look.

"You could have asked 'Who is it?' Or you could have answered: 'Don't come in.' I was so terrified when I saw him that I simply had no idea what to do."

Baby felt suddenly mortally tired. She was afraid of bursting

into tears as if she had to breathe the same air as the old woman for another five minutes.

She collected her bag and her dark glasses and went out into the hall.

"Where are you going?" shrilled her mother-in-law.

By way of reply, Baby slammed the door as loudly as Törzs had done a few minutes earlier.

8

THAT AFTERNOON, at six o'clock, Baby had an appointment with the nerve specialist. She arrived punctually at the great hospital which loomed up like a little independent city on the outskirts of the capital. Everything was grouped together there from the baby clinic to the lunatic asylum. Every variety of human misfortune was represented in the buildings scattered about the enormous part. Baby had already consulted Dr. Kelemen; she walked into the stone hall of the psychiatric clinic and knocked on the first door on the right.

"Come in," said a gentle voice from inside.

Baby entered. The doctor came towards her, smiling, and kissed her hand.

"I'm delighted to see you, Madame. Do sit down."

He was already holding out a box of cigarettes and clicking his lighter. Although the sun was still shining brilliantly outside, in here the drawn curtains made an artificial dusk. A heavy astmosphere brooded over the room, dimly lit by a green shaded desk lamp: an atmosphere redolent of coffee, ether and cigarettes. Some coffee was heating up on a spirit stove on the corner of the vast desk.

Doctor Kelemen, a man with ascetic features framed in black hair brushed smoothly back without parting, sat down again behind this desk and inserted a cigarette in his holder. Then, leaning sympathetically towards the young woman, he began to question her:

"What's worrying you, Madame?"

"I have a perpetual headache," she said, and this mild ailment took on an exaggerated importance now that she confessed it to the doctor.

Whether it was the influence of her surroundings or the doctor's piercing gaze or quite simply the fact that she was in the presence of a psychiatrist, she burst into tears.

"Come now, tell me what's really the matter," he demanded. Then, so as to let her flood of tears flow unchecked, he busied himself with the coffee and pured out two small cups.

"Drink this, dear lady, it will do you good."

A male nurse dressed in white came into the room as he was speaking.

"Doctor, what should I do? Szabo's having another attack."

"Give him the usual sedative and then bring him here. But see that I'm not disturbed for the time being. . . ."

The hot, fragrant drink restored Baby's serenity. She put down her cup and observed the doctor in her turn. How old could he be? Impossible to say precisely. The characteristics of a masculine woman and an over-sensitive man were oddly combined in this white-clad individual who gave one the feeling that one could tell him everything. Had not his vocation placed him exactly on the shifting frontier between the confessional and physical and moral illnesses?

"I have continual headaches," Baby repeated insistently. "I can't sleep. I'm always irritable, I've developed a horror of the people I live with . . ."

She launched into a description of her nightmares then; spoke of the dead man who came and sat by her bed; of the hatred she felt for her mother-in-law; of all the little wrinkles that were multiplying round her eyes.

The doctor was so attentive that Baby suddenly wondered whether he were not thinking of something else, since what she was saying could not be as important as all that. Discouraged, she fell silent.

"You're suffering from the sickness of the time we're living in,"

he took her up eagerly, as if he only had been waiting till Baby ran out of breath. "It's a very common disease these days. I've six cases in the clinic whom I've got to cure of anxiety. Thanks to sedative drugs, I can make them sleep."

"But *I'm* not frightened," Baby vehemently protested.

The doctor interrupted her:

"No one wants to admit to themselves that they're frightened. But even someone who has nothing to fear is gnawed by anxiety. One can tremble for no definite reason—one can be perpetually expecting something disastrous to happen. You mustn't forget that we've lived for months in cellars, under a rain of bullets. Under the threat, too, of typhoid fever and various other diseases. It's inevitable all that should leave traces. Not to mention what came after—what we're living through here and now. . . ."

Baby reminded herself she must be discreet. Kelemen belonged to the "old school"; he was one of those outstanding doctors whom the new régime had spared on account of their exceptional usefulness. Nevertheless, they had removed him from his position as head doctor.

Baby wanted, at all costs, to prove that her illness was a real illness, independent of the course of history and of changes in the political régime.

"I suffered with my head long before the siege," she said. But her voice lacked the ring of conviction and she began to regret that she had come. She realised that the doctor would be incapable of curing her; the precise diagnosis, which confirmed her own private theories, only made her the more depressed. She began to talk about the Lyric Opera. The doctor was passionately fond of music which was how he had come to make Janos's acquaintance before the war.

"What luck they let him go on working," said Kelemen, refilling Baby's coffee-cup.

She did not touch it.

"He's a Party member," she said dryly.

Kelemen smiled.

" So am I, dear lady."

He felt sorry for her.

" Look here, we're both Party members and we work for the common good and the cause of progress, don't we? Very well, then! Let's take all that for granted. Meanwhile I'll prescribe a sedative for you. And, if it's possible for you, I advise you to go and stay in the country for a while."

He scribbled a prescription on a sheet of paper and handed it to Baby.

" A teaspoonful three times a day, before meals. This will give you back your sleep . . . By the way, what are they putting on next at the Lyric Theatre? "

" The *Flight from the Seraglio*. Janos will send you a ticket for the first night . . . it'll be ten days from now. In three or four days, they'll be putting up the notices."

" It will give me great pleasure to be one of the audience," said the doctor. " Immense pleasure. I hope I shall see you there. And, meanwhile, if anything worries you, come and see me again . . ."

" Yes," agreed Baby.

She held out her hand to him and left the room. It was not until the hospital porter energetically barred her way at the exit that she realised she was not walking but running. The man imagined that one of the female patients was trying to escape. He would not let her go until he had telephoned the doctor to assure himself of her identity.

9

At Boglar, Ida's absence created a cruel void. Her father's thoughts revolved round her incessantly.

"Have I the right to condemn her?" he asked himself at intervals. "Can I take it on myself to go against the laws of nature?"

But, every time, an inner voice silenced his scruples. If he let her follow in her mother's footsteps with impunity, later on, some man would endure the same torturing conflicts on her account that he was doing now. For him, the days and nights dragged on interminably. Anna went out to watch the harvesters and returned at midday, sunburnt and covered with dust.

"The wheat is splendid," she kept saying. And her lips uttered the word "wheat" as if she had just crunched a grain between her teeth and could still savour the taste of it.

Little Theresa did not return home till evening. The moment the reaping began, she had joined in with the farm labourers. Side by side with the robust peasant girls, she gathered and bound up the golden sheaves. Before the war, Sandor would never have tolerated her being in their company. Now, on the contrary, any direct contact with the soil was good policy. Had not the land become like a mother who was always on the point of bidding her children farewell and who could only be kept at home if she were treated with the utmost consideration? The State counted the furrows and officially calculated their potential yield. The prospect of collective farms on the Russian model hung over the country like a fowler's net, ready to drop at any moment. . . .

Every evening, Istvan, a slim sunburnt young peasant, brought Theresa back to the village in his cart. Istvan, who had been a prisoner of war, had just returned from captivity and was working as a farm labourer. He was animated by a wild passion for the land. Like a strong, handsome young animal, he ate and rested in silence in the intervals of work, only to return to it with more desperate vigour than ever.

He called Theresa " Miss." When he helped her to get up on to his cart, his calloused hands became as gentle as if he were letting a dove fly up from them.

The harvest made the village look like an overturned antheap. Everyone scurried feverishly back to his own home, carrying the crumb that was his portion. Beside the threshing machine which was surrounded by gigantic stacks of straw, an inspector stood sealing the sacks into which the golden grain had been poured. Private individuals were only allowed a small portion; officialdom had calculated almost to a pound the annual ration of flour indispensable to a person of average appetite. All the rest went to the State.

There were no inspectors by the machine that threshed the notary's wheat. After all, as a State employee, he was supposed to know his duty.

" This winter we shall have a famine in the village, in spite of the magnificent harvest," said Anna thoughtfully, as she spread her slice of bread with pale honey. " Luckily, at least we'll be well provided for ourselves; we may even be able to sell the surplus. As soon as the harvest's over, I shall have our bedroom ceiling repainted."

Sandor shuddered. The only thing he really thought of as his own in that house was that odd, zigzagging line on the ceiling. It had been his ally in troubled dawns; when he stared at it, he felt less alone. However, he made no protest. What was the use? When Anna had made up her mind about something, she never let go . . . He told himself that no one had ever died as a result of having had his ceiling redecorated and he went on drinking his coffee and replying to his wife in monosyllables.

A fly settled on the notary's forehead and brought him out of his

reverie. He brushed it away absent-mindedly and consulted his watch. A quarter past nine already. He must go back to his office at once. Anna had vanished without his noticing that she had gone.

Just as Sandor was about to open his letters, his assistant burst into the room.

"What's the matter?" asked Sandor.

"The Party's provincial deputy is arriving about eleven. As it's about something important, I've informed the Communal Council."

"Good," said Sandor. "And what *is* it about?"

The carroty-haired man did not blink an eyelid.

"I don't know the details but we'll soon know all about it. Have you any urgent work for me in the meantime, Comrade?"

Sandor detested his assistant's deference which was entirely on the surface. As a member of the Communist Party, this man was in actual fact, the only all-powerful employee at the Town Hall.

"No, thanks," he answered curtly. "I'll deal with the urgent business myself."

His agonising uncertainty made the hours pass incredibly slowly. It was almost with relief that Sandor heard the doors of a car slam round at the front of the house. He glanced at his desk to see that everything on it was in order, then, after a moment's hesitation, he took off his tie and stuffed it in his pocket. He stood up as he heard footsteps approaching.

"Liberty, Comrade," he said, holding out his hand to the deputy who entered.

He was a corpulent man with greying hair.

"Liberty," replied the deputy, fixing Sandor with a severe eye.

The rest of the company appeared in the doorway.

The assistant was feverishly clutching a leather brief-case, the deputy's. The entire Communal Council followed in his wake. Charged with safeguarding the interests of the village and of the people against anything that might endanger them, it numbered three members: the shoemaker whom want had driven into the

Communist Party before the war; a farm labourer whom a patch of ground, dismembered from the great estate, had transformed into a landed proprietor and the village mechanic who mended the tractors. This last was a youth of twenty-three, the son of the grocer. They entered the notary's office, so highly conscious of their importance that Sandor had not even time to invite them to sit on the chairs he had put ready for them in advance. The assistant pushed the only arm-chair close to the desk; he himself remained standing, leaning against the door jamb, as if fascinated by the scene that was about to begin. As it happened, it was over very quickly and went without a hitch. It was almost as if it had been rehearsed beforehand.

Sandor, having clasped his hands with his usual gesture, addressed himself to the deputy:

"What can I do for the esteemed Comrade?"

The latter picked up his brief-case and drew out a paper which he seemed to study attentively. But his eyes did not move. Sandor noticed this and could have sworn it was a blank sheet.

"Comrade Notary," said the deputy at last. "Disturbing reports have been received by the Central Committee."

He looked at the members of the Communal Council who nodded their heads approvingly like so many automata.

The assistant notary was watching Sandor's face with a malevolent eye. Only his freckles identified him with the hitherto humble subordinate.

The deputy raised his voice, and stopped staring at the paper.

"The Central Committee is not satisfied . . ."

Sandor's nerves had grown so tense that his voice turned quite hoarse as he asked:

"What has happened? Has there been some carelessness in administration?"

The deputy surveyed him contemptuously:

"Carelessness in administration! That *would* be the only thing that occurred to the mind of a bourgeois employee permeated with the old bureaucracy! . . . Administration! . . . Do you imagine, Comrade, you can make the People and the Party believe that you

don't know what this is all about? Do you mean to say you can't feel despair growing all about you? Do you reckon on defying the anger of the people indefinitely It's the land we're talking about, Comrade Notary, *your* land. You have shamefully exploited the generosity of the State . . ."

Sandor was dumbfounded.

"I don't understand you," he muttered. "I've always maintained every scrap of my land, I've handed over the required quota to the State. And I shall be the first to get going on the autumn work . . ."

The deputy drummed on his brief-case as he listened. The moment the notary had finished speaking, he launched forth again in a magisterial tone.

"The land is not yours, Comrade Notary, it belongs to the People . . . And anyone who aspires to keep it for himself can only be an enemy of the People."

"It was the State itself that authorised me to keep these fifty hectares," Sandor insisted. "It even decorated me for resistance to the enemy."

The deputy swept the air with his hand.

"The State has shown itself generous towards you, but if you stretch a bowstring too tight, it snaps . . . Look, I have brought you the deed of renunciation of your property. As head of the village community you ought to set a good example and freely renounce your land for the benefit of the State."

Sweat began to break out on the notary's forehead. He wanted to mop it away, but, instead of his handkerchief, his fingers encountered the tie rolled up in a ball in his pocket.

"But certainly," he murmured. "I've often thought of it myself . . . It goes without saying . . . I shall offer my land to the People . . ."

The deputy laid three typewritten sheets on the desk.

"This is what you have to sign," he said. "The Communal Council will countersign."

The three sitting in a row against the wall stood up like one man.

" Wait a moment, Comrades," the deputy told them.

With his fleshy forefinger, he pointed to a place on the sheet.

" Look, this is where you have to sign."

Sandor stared at the forefinger with its square nail. " Yes," he said to himself. The assistant, over by the door, coughed slightly, as if to signify his impatience. Sandor took up the pen and inscribed his name in extremely legible letters.

When they made him sign the two other sheets, he felt as if, having knocked him down, they had kicked him twice for good measure. The members of the Council also bustled forward and appended their clumsy signatures to the document.

Then everyone disappeared from the room with incredible alacrity. Standing in front of the window that looked out on the garden, Sandor was almost on the point of wondering whether his senses had deceived him. But when he returned to his desk, he actually found one of the copies of the deed of renunciation on it. He turned giddy and left the room to go and warn Anna. As he passed through the assistant's office, he forced himself to smile. Out of bravado, he had meant to remark casually how thorougly he approved of what had happened—but this was beyond his strength.

Anna was tidying the cupboard in the dining-room. Sandor cautiously shut the door, also the windows that gave on to the street.

" Why are you shutting yourself in like that? " demanded Anna.

As she turned round, she saw her husband's drawn face and came up to him anxiously.

" Whatever's happened? "

" They've taken the land away from us. All of it . . . in five minutes. I've had to renounce it for the benefit of the State . . ."

His wife, too, turned pale, but the words she spoke through her clenched teeth were hissing with hatred.

" It's your fault," she said. " I've always had a presentiment this would turn out badly. Why didn't you join the Party while there was still time? I told you often enough to do it . . ."

"I wasn't willing to spit in my own face even to please you. Curse the fate that made us lose the war, not me . . ."

Anna's face was convulsed with rage.

"Fifty hectares," she burst out, "and you announce that calmly! And we haven't even got in the harvest."

"There won't be much to get in this year," he observed, almost serenely.

His wife's fury diminished his own regret for the loss.

"May I be permitted to give you a piece of good advice?" he added, preparing to leave the room. "Try to smile and look pleasant. Explain to everyone that we have spontaneously offered our property to the State because our conscience would no longer tolerate a situation recalling the capitalist era. Theresa must be told what line to take . . . she must pretend to be proud of her parents' gesture. That way, we may possibly avoid the worst . . ."

"What worse could happen to us?" demanded Anna. But her terrified face revealed that she knew the answer.

"What might happen to us?" Sandor's tone was almost bland. "They might, for example, take the house from us and intern us in a concentration camp, like so many others . . ."

"But why should they? You've done nothing wrong. On the contrary, at the beginning, you were feted as a national hero for having resisted the Germans . . ."

"They don't need us any longer," Sandor replied calmly. "We're all superfluous. Yes—superfluous."

In the doorway, he turned and added:

"Write and tell Ida to come back home. Let's all stay together . . . as long as we're still able to."

10

Stretched out on the burning stone jetty, Marton offered his sunburnt, admirably-proportioned body to the sun. The lake was no more than a wide, motionless pool; incandescent as molten metal. With his whole being, the young man passionately drank in the noonday heat and hardly noticed Melinda's presence at his side. Nevertheless, the girl was lying so close to him on the hot concrete that, from a distance, they might have been taken for some strange jellyfish risen from the depths of the lake and furnished with four arms, four legs and two human heads.

Melinda turned her head; the tip of her nose brushed against one of the young man's projecting ribs. He would have liked to move a little farther away; all human proximity disturbed him when he was sensuously delighting in the sun's caress, but he did not want to hurt the girl's feelings. Melinda laid a butterfly-light kiss on Marton's arm; her lips were soft and cool. Marton remained perfectly still; in these moments that seemed to belong to eternity, he was conscious of a deep, utter peace in body and soul. It was as if life had nothing more to offer him that had not already fallen to his lot; as if there were no pleasure, no pain, no future possibility—only this blessed instant in which everything melted into one intensity of heat and light. It was at that moment that a new spot that had suddenly broken out on the back of his hand suddenly began to began to itch maddeningly. At first, he refused to take any notice of this vulgar summons back to earth, but soon he no longer minded: he sat up and scratched himself furiously. The backs of his hands and fingers were covered with spots of various sizes, a deplorable

souvenir he had brought back from Russia, where, as a prisoner of war, famished and swarming with lice, he had reckoned the passage of time by the successive appearance of the spots. This skin disease was confined to his hands, but, up to now, he had not succeeded in curing it.

"Does that hurt?" inquired Melinda. Her velvety eyes were those of a nurse bending over a severely wounded man.

"It doesn't hurt, it itches," replied Marton, promptly getting to his feet.

Through her half-closed lids, Melinda observed the young man as he walked forward with his face to the sun. His broad frame no longer bore any resemblance to the emaciated skeleton that had returned from Russia a few weeks earlier; his ribs were still a little prominent, that was all. Marton began by dipping his hands in the water; then, changing his mind, he slid his whole body into it noiselessly, without disturbing the surface any more than a fish. He swam out some way, then turned back in his tracks. Melinda shivered all over with expectation . . . her lips half-opened, waiting for a kiss . . . Cold drops splashed on her body as Marto lay down once more beside her . . . just a trifle farther away. The dazzling rays still poured down from the sky, lulling them into a trance. Frustrated of the expected kiss, Melinda rolled over on her face and pressed her lips against the burning stone, kissing it with ardent, despairing passion.

11

" Must I really put on a little more lipstick? " Ida asked, looking at herself undecidedly in her aunt's big glass.

Baby, all ready dressed to go out, was advising her from where she sat on the divan.

" Of course you must put on more make-up at night, especially for the theatre. Artificial light falsifies colours. If you don't allow for it, you'll look like a corpse during the intervals."

Ida ran her lipstick over her mouth again. Her lips took on a hard contour, and looked rigid, like a mask's. Ida studied this curiously full, older woman's mouth against her sun-tanned skin. Then she studied the dress whose material was so incredibly soft and delicate and fingered its skirt.

" Yes, it's pure silk," smiled Baby. " Foulard."

" Are you ready? " demanded Janos, thrusting his head round the half-open door.

His starched shirt bulged slightly under his black overcoat.

" Your shirt front," observed Baby, in a cutting voice. " It doesn't sit properly. It might get up to tricks while you're conducting the orchestra."

Janos made a face.

" You pick on the slightest flaw but, when it comes to putting it right, it's a very different story . . . Now, then, instead of criticising, come and fix this shirt-front for me."

" What do you want me to do with it? "

" *I'll* deal with it," said a voice from the next room. This direct

butting-in on their conversation made them feel as if the old woman were in the same room with them.

"I'm off," said Janos. "Time I went. You ought to leave in three quarters of an hour. It's ten past seven and we start punctually at quarter past eight."

"Can we take a taxi?" Baby suggested timidly.

Janos answered from the hall:

"No, no taxi. You know perfectly well not. And don't let me see you with white gloves up to your elbow or I'll slap you."

"But I *insist* on wearing my gloves," Baby called back, almost crying with rage.

Janos came back abruptly into the room. Seizing her by the wrist, he bent down close to her face.

"That's enough of your tomfoolery! I don't want you to make yourself conspicuous to the entire theatre. That dress will just pass, but if you dare to put on gloves, I'll break every bone in your body. Do you want to put a rope round our necks with those kid-gloved fingers of yours?"

Baby stood up: a perfect example of a woman *soignée* to her fingertips and discreetly provocative in her black, high-necked dress.

"Aha," she teased him gently, without stressing her words. "So Mr. Dorogi's in a temper! It wasn't enough for Mr. Dorogi to get rid of the name of Tasnady as if he were taking off a dirty shirt! He's still frightened . . ."

Mamma entered the room and threw her weight into the quarrel.

"Aren't you ashamed of upsetting Janos like that before the first night? And if it's a question of the new name, well, it's yours too. If he calls himself Mr. Dorogi, very well then, you're Mrs. Dorogi and you ought to behave yourself . . ."

". . . In a way that does credit to the name of Dorogi?" interrupted Baby. "That's what you mean, isn't it, Mamma? And the family's new coat-of-arms, where's that?"

"Mamma, why is she such a little beast?" shouted Janos. And his shirt-front stuck out farther than ever.

" Why is she like that . . . Why? But are you blind, son? Do you mean to say you can't see that she's only so sure of herself because she feels she's got someone behind her? If you imagine that Törzs comes to see us simply and solely because he's interested in music, you couldn't be more mistaken! "

Janos shuddered at hearing the name of Törzs. He wished that this whole painful scene had never begun.

" You mustn't exaggerate, Mamma," he said, recoiling towards the door. " You mustn't exaggerate . . . And it's shaming to have such a discussion in front of Ida. Whatever will she think of us all? "

But, crazy with rage, the old woman plunged on like a tank, not caring what bounds she overstepped.

" Oh, yes? I exaggerate, do I? You poor booby! So you think I exaggerate? Well, *I* happen to be always at home—and do you know what goes on behind your back? "

Sweat broke out in beads on Janos's forehead.

" For goodness' sake, Mamma, be quiet. It's a subject we simply mustn't discuss . . . We might all burn our fingers."

Baby observed them with airy calm. She had carefully prepared phrases on the tip of her tongue . . . She would have liked her mother-in-law to continue her diatribe; then she could have thrown their abjection in their face and screamed at them, that if she had meetings with Törzs, it was for their sake and in the family interests. She could already see herself throwing up her head like an offended queen, covering them with confusion by her unanswerable arguments. But the quarrel had suddenly stopped like dirty water vanishing down the sink with a final gurgle.

" My shirt-front . . . would you fix it, Mamma? "

" Come here, darling," replied the old woman, still choking with rage. " Who'd look after you if I weren't here, my precious, my poor darling precious? "

As this family scene had been stopped dead by a kind of short-circuit, Baby could not have the last word which would have given her the star part. This was the most unbearable of all . . .

" No, no, I refuse to cry," she said to Ida, her face contorted. " It would ruin my make-up and I haven't time to do my face again. But if you knew how I loathed them! To think that the doctor prescribed quiet—told me to go to the country and . . ."

The door-bell rang. Janos came striding back into the room with a folded paper in his hand.

" A telegram for Ida . . ."

He handed her the telegram and rushed out, slamming the door.

A wave of jealousy swept over Baby as she saw the telegram. How happy she would have been if it had been meant for her . . . A person who gets a telegram has a link with another human being; he has a distant ally, ready to throw him a life-belt.

When she had read the telegram, Ida's face lit up.

" I can go home," she said. " Mother says I can take the next train back to Boglar . . ."

" But why? What's happened? "

Ida smiled.

" I don't think anything's happened—except that my parents have realised that nothing can stop our love, Marton's and mine."

In any other circumstances, Baby would have seized on the girl's partial confession as a pretext for dissecting and analysing her secret. But to-night she was so weary and demoralised that she only took her up on the word " love."

" Love—our love," she repeated bitterly. " One day you'll realise what that means when you see it close to . . . *I* married when I was twenty-four. Married a young orchestra conductor with a brilliant future and a famous old family name. I thought my life would be spent in luxury hotels in the great capitals, that there'd be the excitement of endless concert tours. And what happened? We never even got as far as Vienna. It's here, in his own country, that he's made his success. He's become fat and gross, and, ever since we got married, that horrible old woman has lived with us. Naturally, *he* adores her, like all good sons. And now there's no longer the slightest hope of our travelling abroad. There's nothing left of my dreams—not even our name. Yet it all began with love.

Perhaps not a real grand passion—but love all the same. Second class love, let's call it, with a few secret clauses . . ."

Ida was only half listening. When Baby stopped talking, she crowed triumphantly.

" I love him and he loves me. And *our* love isn't like any other love—it's something more, ever so much more . . ."

Suddenly, she sat down beside her aunt.

" I say, why don't you come back with me to Boglar to-morrow? Then you could meet Marton and see how charming he is."

" That's not a bad idea," said Baby enthusiastically. " Yes. I'll come with you. After all, that's exactly what the doctor advised me to do. But what will your mother say if I arrive without her having invited me? "

" She'll be delighted! The guest room is always kept ready. Yes, do come. It'll be marvellous."

Baby felt comforted: the telegram, in a way, had been for her as well.

" Yes, I *will* come," she said decidedly. " But now we must be off. It's time we went. After all, we can't miss the first night! "

Nothing could shake Ida's good humour or induce her to part with her precious telegram. She held it firmly but gently, as if a living heart lay in the hollow of her hand.

" Tell me, Aunt Baby," she said shyly. " Who wrote the music of the *Flight from the Seraglio*? "

Baby burst out laughing.

" Mozart," she said gaily. " Mozart . . ."

12

MARTON KEPT turning over and over a postcard in his brown hand —his unfortunate hand that was tormented by the mysterious skin disease.

"When you read these lines, I shall already be in the train. I'm arriving at seven this evening with my aunt. Will you be at the station? Love, Ida."

And right in the corner, as if the pen had dropped it there by chance, was the little word "much."

Marton realised that, if Ida were coming back, he would have to make up his mind one way or the other; they could not resume their midnight meetings for now everyone would be in the know. Yet the secret the two young people shared had a special private significance for him. The little hut among the vines was something more than a shelter for their meetings; it was the place that had fostered the slow awakening of a feeling that had long lain dormant in the depths of his consciousness: desire.

Ever since he had returned from captivity, there had been nothing he wanted. Something had been distorted in his heart: his twenty-five year old body had housed the dried-up heart of a man of ninety. They had had to carry him on a stretcher from the train that brought him from Russia to his mother's house in Boglar. His mother had flung herself on that poor, enfeebled body as if she would have liked to warm it with her own blood and give birth to it a second time. Not long ago, they had taken away her pension as a retired schoolmistress. The poor woman was now living in incredible austerity on what little she could grow in

the field that surrounded her house. The tall, handsome boy she had sent to the military school, who had fought and been wounded and endured the slow, seemingly endless days in a prison camp had returned to her after long years of waiting almost as the widow's son of Naim must have returned to his family after Christ had raised him from the dead. As she watched day and night by his bedside, the mother had waited in vain to hear the words: "I'd like . . ." or "I want . . ." Marton no longer wanted anything. He swallowed his medicines without protest; he let himself be nursed, but he had no desires. In the end, he grew strong enough to cultivate their small patch of land; he lived like an automaton and smiled like an automaton. The only thing that made him really happy was the sun he so passionately loved. Sometimes he would lie down on the ploughed field with his arms stretched out as if he wanted to embrace the world around him and absorb as much as possible of the blessed warmth that he had so cruelly lacked in the far north. His health quickly improved out of all knowledge. Soon there was nothing but the pimples on his hands and his frigid heart to make him any different from other young men. During his convalescence, an unknown man who refused to give his name, came to see him. In carefully neutral words, he was invited to join a small resistance group. Marton listened with baited breath: how was he to know whether the man was a patriot or an *agent provocateur*? But, in his heart, he did not much care either way.

"I don't believe in the Resistance," he told the stranger quietly. "The régime we're living under now is destined to succeed, whether we like it or not. I'm not going to be the cog that breaks down and stops the machine. In any case, if it did stop, it would only be for five minutes—just long enough to replace the cog . . . I don't know who you are and I don't propose to ask you: you can go off with an easy mind. But you can't get *me* going with fine words any longer. There's nothing behind the words. Nothing."

To keep up appearances, the stranger talked of the weather and various other topics. Then he went away and never reappeared

in the village. Marton had been a subaltern during the war but he thought about his uniform as indifferently as a woman does about her first ball dress. It was something which had been so important at the time and was now nothing more than a youthful memory . . . Marton felt himself to be morally inferior to the time he was living in, yet it seemed to him that, every single day, he had to begin the struggle against a hidden power all over again. He dimly guessed that they had their eye on him, that they had not forgotten him and that, one day, whether he liked it or not, he would be entrusted again with a mission. For this reason, he took the days that passed uneventfully as a gift from heaven . . . Ida, too, was part of this daily life that had become an agreeable habit. Love awakened slowly, like a far-off echo of his youth. At night he went down to the little hut like an aged lover returning in imagination to the scene of a vanished romance. He was moved when he drew Ida into his arms but afterwards, when they had made love and lay side by side on the straw, he felt as ill at ease as if he had been no more than some tactless person spying on a pair of lovers.

Far from being a drawback in his eyes, Ida's lameness only drew them closer together. For him, she was all the more lovable, for the heavy burden of her deformity. He felt the two of them had been made for each other: he with his prematurely aged heart, she with her crooked hip.

"I shall marry her," thought Marton, as he turned over the postcard. "And I shall tell her so to-night."

13

At the moment of departure, Baby vaguely regretted her sudden decision to leave town. But it was too late to go back on it; they had their tickets and the luggage was already in the rack. Ida, sparkling with happiness, was fussing over her aunt in the third-class carriage; she seemed to be already looking on her as her guest even before they had left Budapest.

Leaning out of the carriage window, Baby was exchanging last words with her husband. Janos kept giving furtive glances at his watch: the minutes, punctuated by repeated good-byes, seemed to him interminable. He had already said several times: "Look after yourself, be good, get plenty of rest," and still the train showed no signs of moving. They had exhausted all the remarks people make on these occasions and they were staring at each other with polite, absent expressions when Janos suddenly remembered something.

"Quick—get out, Baby, I've forgotten to warn you about something important."

Baby pouted.

"We're just off . . ."

"Get out, I tell you . . ."

Ida ensconced herself in a corner and began to read, hoping her attitude would convince them she could be trusted to be discreet.

Baby stepped out on to the platform. Janos bent down and lightly brushed her cheek.

"There's a smut on your face," he said out loud, then added between his teeth: "Be extremely careful about what you say.

Sandor's still doing his job—they haven't dismissed him, so the régime obviously feels he's a man they can trust. So choose your words carefully."

"Is the smut still there?" asked Baby, winking to show that she had understood."

"No. Now you can go off with your mind at rest."

A thin station employee in a threadbare jacket raised the departure signal at the other end of the platform. The engine driver leaned out of the great locomotive, all gleaming with oil, and waved his hand, as if saying good-bye. Gently, with much grinding of wheels, the train moved off. Baby watched Janos's figure growing smaller and smaller on the platform. As she turned to sit down, she saw two newcomers in the compartment; a young peasant woman and an old one. The racks were entirely filled with their empty baskets and even their laps were piled with bundles; they smelt of soot and smoke. Baby tried to take a seat, but they drew close together to prove they were not occupying her place. Baby would have preferred to sit beside Ida but dared not change her seat for fear of offending the two women.

"If I move, they might take it as a sign of contempt," she thought as she opened Maxim Gorki's *Mother* with a forced smile. Janos had insisted that, in public, she must read only Russian authors. She had possessed this book for a considerable time but had never had the courage to read it. She detested the atmosphere of poverty and obscure misery which suffused it. For her, Russian literature began and ended with the aristocratic heroine *Anna Karenina*.

Baby had not travelled since the war and, by an unfortunate oversight, it had never even occurred to her that trains were no longer what they used to be. She remembered the handsome, comfortably-upholstered carriages from which she had dreamily watched the landscape sliding by through half-closed eyes. Baby always dressed with special care for travelling, invariably choosing clothes of the casual, sports type that managed to be also extremely elegant. She always went into the restaurant car, if only for a cup of coffee. Enveloped in a cloud of smoke from her cigarette, she

enjoyed the sensuous flattery of masculine glances, bold or discreet. She got up from the table as if she were jumping out of a car, stretching out her slim legs before leaping to her feet in one light bound that showed off the grace of her figure. On the way back to her compartment, she would slow down her pace as she passed through the first-class coaches where greying heads dozed against the lace antimacassars. But when she went through the third-class ones where the common folk, kindly enough but always smelling slightly of onions, were unpacking their food for the journey, she hurried as fast as she could. At the end of her walk, her own compartment, where her magazines awaited her, appeared like a blessed haven.

How far away all that seemed to-day . . . The fat woman beside her had taken off her head scarf and was fishing some bread and bacon out of a knotted handkerchief. She cut off a slice of bacon with her penknife and offered it to the young peasant before resuming her narrative of a difficult birth. It was impossible to guess whether she was talking of a woman in labour or an animal. The rancid smell of the bacon filled the compartment. Baby tried to open the window that had been shut again when the train started. In the old days, she had only to raise her hand towards it for someone promptly to bound to their feet to anticipate her. Now, no one paid the slightest attention. If she couldn't open the window, so much the worse for her; it was a private affair between her and the glass! Even Ida was too absorbed in her reading to notice. The young mother began to take off the baby's diaper. An unmistakable smell assaulted Baby's nostrils.

" If I don't manage to open this window, I shall faint," she said to herself. She made one final effort and the glass yielded.

Baby leaned out and breathed in the warm draught of the outside air.

14

It seemed to Baby that she had been travelling for days on end.

"Have we still far to go?" she asked Ida.

The girl yawned and stretched.

"Another three-quarters of an hour. We ought to get to Boglar at ten to seven."

From that moment on, there was a constant coming and going in the compartment but Baby stayed leaning out of the window. New faces did not interest her in the least. She would gladly have put cotton-wool in her ears so as to hear nothing.

Suddenly, Ida took down the suitcases from the rack, frantically tidied her hair and put on a touch of lipstick.

"In ten minutes, we'll be at Boglar," she announced, her face lit up with joy.

Baby studied her own face long and carefully in the little mirror she had taken out of her bag.

"I must have a bath and tidy myself up before dinner," she thought, powdering her nose.

With much clatter, the train increased its speed . . . It ran hurriedly past the station master's cottage and slowed down like a champion runner out of breath. A long screeching of brake blocks—and they had arrived at Boglar. Ida grabbed up the suitcases and made her way towards the exit.

"I insist on carrying my case," Baby protested feebly.

"We're here," repeated Ida. Her eyes were impatiently searching the little station. "I told Marton we were coming. I'm sure he'll be there."

" What about your parents? " Baby asked a little uneasily. " I implored you to warn them I was coming."

" I didn't write to them," Ida admitted absentmindedly. " But it doesn't matter a bit. They'll be delighted to see us both."

Baby lost her temper.

" But this is monstrous of you, Ida! You might at least have written them a line to say I was coming with you."

Ida was no longer even listening. She clutched her aunt's arm and whispered agitatedly:

" He's there . . . Look, over there, coming out of the waiting-room . . ."

" Who? Your father? "

" No—Marton."

Baby crinkled up her eyes to get a better sight of the young man who was approaching. He wore riding breeches and boots. His bronzed neck gleamed against his white, open-necked shirt. . . .

" Hallo," he said to Ida. Then he halted in front of Baby, looking confused.

" This is my aunt," Ida explained.

Marton bowed to Baby. Her fingers were enclosed in the young man's rugged grip. She felt uneasy. What would her sister's first reaction be, seeing her again after all this time without warning? Would their first embrace draw the two sisters closer together or drive them farther apart?

" Is the carriage outside the station? "

Ida burst out laughing.

" Anyone can see you haven't been to see us since the war! They took the carriage and the horses away from us in 1945. We can't get up there except on foot. But someone will bring our luggage up later."

" You mean to leave the suitcases at the station? " Baby said, aghast. " But the dress I want to wear to-night is in mine."

Ida calmed her down.

" I'll send the maid down for your suitcase. You'll have all your things long before dinner-time."

Outside the station, Baby looked about her. Yes, she remembered it all now: there, on the edge of the lake, was the part where the summer residents lived. The road climbed up to the village and the notary's house . . . Baby had walked up it seven or eight years before; she could see in her mind's eye the motley troop of children and grown-ups returning from the lake, all as brown as gingerbread. Now there was hardly a soul on the main avenue and the station, that used to be so noisy whenever a train came in, was deserted.

Baby walked along uncomfortably in her high-heeled shoes. The two young things, busy chattering, kept getting ahead of her without meaning to. They stopped every twenty yards to let her catch up with them. As they climbed the zig-zag path, the great lake spread out its dark blue mirror at their feet.

"Look, Aunt—over there on the other side. That's the Badacsony where we have our vineyard." Out of politeness, Baby turned round, but without enthusiasm. Her foot stumbled on a loose stone and she nearly fell down in the dusty road. She had the feeling of being left all alone in the universe, perched up on her high, pointed heels and condemned to climb eternally up this steep road.

When they arrived at the village, the sun had just set. Baby shivered in her thin dress. Ida looked at her kindly:

"Are you cold? But it's still summer . . ."

Marton walked beside her in silence, wrapped in his own thoughts. They stopped in front of the garden gate. The house was waiting, serene among its encircling petunias: a small, self-governing kingdom.

"You really ought to have warned them I was coming," Baby said again, rather nervously.

"No, honestly . . . they're always delighted to have you to stay," said Ida absently, without taking her eyes off Marton's profile.

They went through the side door and out on to the veranda. A fleecy pink scarf trailed over one of the wicker chairs; on the

table that morning's paper had not yet been opened. Ida went off to look for her parents. " What luck I didn't run right into them," thought Baby. She turned to Marton, on the point of breaking an embarrassing silence, but the young man had silently vanished, like a shadow. Baby sat down. She would have been only too glad to pick up the shawl and throw it over her shoulders but a strange shyness prevented her.

Light footsteps came tapping down the passage that led to the veranda. Baby stood up, her heart thumping.

Anna halted in the doorway.

" I'm so glad you've come, darling," she said, kissing her sister on both cheeks. They looked at each other searchingly as only women know how to look. Each was trying to read in the other's face the traces left by years that had gone by since they last met.

" Do sit down," said Anna. " What would you like to drink before dinner? "

Without waiting for an answer, she began to chatter and to ask a thousand questions, observing her sister all the time. " Her figure's as slim as ever," she thought. " Even her breasts have only got the least little bit less firm. The skin of her face is still just as fine . . . it's only round her eyes it's withered. Her hair's as golden as before the war . . . perhaps a shade less yellow, a little more ash blonde. Perfectly done, as usual! "

" Are you sure my being here won't upset Sandor? " Baby asked for the fifth time, but gradually regaining her self-confidence. Once the first moments of embarrassment were over she could not keep her eyes off her sister. " It's incredible how black her hair's stayed," she thought, wrapping herself in the pink shawl. " She doesn't look a day older. No, she hasn't got fatter, though she's got a little heavier. She's still the perfect example of the good-looking country woman who washes in rain-water and eats lots of salad. There are men who find that type attractive . . ."

" Delighted you've come, my dear sister-in-law! " It was the voice of Sandor who was coming across the garden. " What a

splendid surprise! That was a grand idea of yours, to come and look us up. But Ida—where's Ida?"

"In the garden," Anna replied, unsmiling. "With Marton——"

"All the same, she might just have looked into my office to give me a kiss . . ."

"She looked everywhere for you," retorted Anna. "It was you she was looking for when she ran into me."

The notary turned to Baby.

"I hope Ida wasn't too much of a nuisance to you in town?"

"Not in the least. She's charming. She has delightful manners and is so grown-up for her age."

"I'll take you up to your room," broke in Anna, rising to her feet. "You can clean yourself up a little before dinner. I warn you the menu couldn't be simpler, scrambled eggs with mushrooms and a salad. I've forgotten whether you like that."

"Oh," exclaimed Baby suddenly. "I've never even thanked you for all that lovely food you sent us. I don't know what we'd have done without your generosity."

Anna let her run on till she had finished before murmuring: "You don't have to thank us. It was only natural on our part."

"I'm going to look for Ida," declared the notary. "Are you sure she's in the garden?"

Anna turned round in the doorway.

"But, of course. They're both there. And tell them to come in for dinner."

"Tell *them*?"

"Yes. Marton can stay on too."

The two women went out into the passage. Baby greeted an old acquaintance in every piece of furniture. And yet, returning to this house gave her an oddly disturbing impression as if she had returned to her own room and found that unknown fingers had left their prints everywhere; prints that were hardly visible, but almost tangible.

"You'll be in the room you had last time you stayed here, when you came with Janos," said Anna, opening a door.

The notary's voice sounded again from the garden.

"Anna, please come here a minute . . ."

"What is it?" she called back irritably.

"I'm not calling you down for nothing. Please come." Anna turned to her sister with a gesture of resignation.

"I'll be back in a moment. I wonder what on earth he wants to say to me."

Anna went quickly down the corridor, almost at a run.

"What do you want, *now*?" she shot at him, boiling over with impatience.

They found themselves once more on the veranda. Putting up a warning finger, the notary went up close to her and said, very low:

"I wanted to warn you in time to be careful what you say . . ."

"Be on my guard with my own sister? Why, with her I can surely . . ."

"Nonsense," he broke in. "It's not her I'm thinking of, but her husband. Janos is a Party member. How do you know he isn't an informer? After all, he's got to pay for his security in one way or another . . . Whatever you do, don't complain about their having taken our land. Mention it with a smile on your lips, explain that we've renounced it willingly, of our own accord. Behave with complete assurance and don't go into too much detail. It's not necessary to sing the praises of the régime—that might look fishy. Just talk about it all calmly, like someone who has resigned themselves to the course of events and has not the least intention of making recriminations."

The prolonged whispering lent a note of intimacy to their conversation; it was a long time since they had felt so close, like partners in the same game. Nevertheless, Anna remained a trifle hostile as she always did when the first suggestion did not come from herself.

"Have we got to put on the same act in front of Ida?" she asked.

"No, of course not. I'm going out to them—her and Marton—in the garden. I shall explain to them that now we're poor."

"What about Marton?"

"I'm not afraid of Marton. You can trust him—he's an officer."

"He *was* one. He *was* an officer," Anna insisted.

"He still is," replied the notary, almost affectionately. "His uniform is in rags, but he's still a boy of the good old pre-war type. Besides, it's on the basis of that that I'm going to regularise their . . ." He was on the point of saying "affair" but checked himself and changed his sentence to: ". . . that I'm going to straighten things out between them."

★ ★ ★

"Here's the suitcase," said the maid, after knocking at the bedroom door. She pushed open the door and put down the luggage.

Baby began to unpack her things, installing herself as if she were beginning a new life. She hung up her dresses one by one in the big cupboard, first shaking them out as if to banish the last trace of the past from their folds. Then she turned back the bedspread, lay down on the blankets and laid her face against the pillow-case that was still all glossy from ironing. "Ah," she thought, with exquisite pleasure. "It was worth the trouble of coming here, just to sleep in sheets that have been bleached in the sun and smell of vanilla."

"How rich they are," she sighed, closing her eyes. "They've got land and a lovely house. They haven't taken a thing away from them. How different life is—in the country and in Budapest. Here, at least, one feels secure . . ."

Törzs, from here, seemed far away and hardly dangerous at all. Janos, at this distance, lost all his aggressiveness too. She even went so far as to detect a touch of kindliness in her hatred for her mother-in-law's smile. The cool, fresh linen that smelt so good gilded the whole of reality with a dreamlike halo. Somewhere in the distance bells began to ring. Their solemn sound rose and fell as if some capricious breeze were amusing itself by playing hide-and-seek with it among the foliage of a dense wood. Revived every evening by

copious watering, the petunias opened wide their velvety flowers and sent heavy gusts of perfume through the open windows.

"Were you asleep?" asked Anna, bending over her sister. Baby shifted her head and slipped back into sleep like a ring sliding off a bather's finger.

"Are you asleep?" repeated Anna, shaking her.

With a deep sigh, Baby opened her eyelids. She encountered a look so hard that she promptly sat up with a shudder, as if a cold douche were running all down her spine . . .

"I fell asleep," she muttered.

"Dinner's ready," said Anna, in an exasperated voice.

15

RIGHT AT the bottom of the garden, where the hillside sloped so sharply that, to reach the fence, you could not help running, there was a bench in the shade of some great trees. Marton and Ida were sitting on it, staring at the little gate.

"No, don't come to-night," said Marton.

Ida shivered. Her lips trembled and she clenched her jaws to force back the tears.

"Why?" she protested feebly. "What's happened? While I've been away, has someone else . . ."

"There's no one else," interrupted Marton, almost harshly.

His finely-arched nose and his slightly too full, but well-modelled lips might have been engraved on a Roman coin. The words he wanted to say kept revolving impatiently in his head, but a mysterious force paralysed his tongue. Without looking at the girl beside him, he was conscious of all her suffering, yet he could not bring himself to pronounce the words that would liberate her. Suddenly the idea of getting married seemed to him completely absurd. Why take a decision, why, even by the act of taking one, disturb this blessed state of lethargy? He gazed at the smooth trunk of a sapling and felt the same sensation of blissful freedom. It was a little like the serenity of old men who fall into somnolence as soon as the noise round them ceases and are hardly conscious of their bodies any more. That flesh and blood that Marton's mother had built up again round the wretched skeleton could not quite adapt themselves to it. The soul—the same as before, but tired

and worn-out—no longer animated this reconstituted body but felt like a prisoner in a box.

The notary's voice shook the young couple out of their torpor.

" Ida where are you? Dinner's ready . . . Ida! "

The girl called out in answer:

" We're on the little bench . . ."

Marton started: he managed at last to tear his gaze away from the shining bark of the birch-trees. He looked at Ida's miserable face.

" I want to marry you," he said quickly. " Will you? "

The girl stared at him, unbelieving. She dared not answer, afraid that she had misunderstood, or that she was dreaming.

" To marry you," repeated Marton emphatically. He dared not look at the birches again for fear of falling back into his reverie.

The notary's figure appeared among the trees. In the twilight he looked bowed and heavy. Marton stood up and went to meet him.

" How do you do, Uncle Sandor," he said, stopping in front of the notary. They shook hands. Sandor would have liked to scrutinise Marton's eyes but dusk was already drawing a thick veil between their questioning glances. A cicada began to sing in the wet grass. Above their heads, the stars were glittering so brightly that they seemed quite close.

" Dinner is ready," said the notary in a low voice. Then he turned to Ida.

" My dear, you didn't even come and say hallo to me when you arrived."

Ida rose to her feet swiftly and lightly and flung her arms round her father's neck.

" Darling little Papa," she mumured in a troubled voice.

He had the painful impression that he was clasping his arms round his daughter's ghost.

" I want to marry your daughter Ida," said Marton in the decided, yet distant voice of someone talking in his sleep.

At that, the girl leant against her father with all her weight.

"Did you hear?" she said softly. "Did you hear what he just said, Papa darling? And he's talking about *me*."

"Do you love Ida, my boy?" asked the notary, much moved. That beautiful young body was once more a living weight in his arms; he was aware of a happiness he had not known since the early days of his marriage.

"I love her," a muffled voice replied in the darkness.

For a second the notary had felt alone in the world with his daughter under a moonless sky. But a strange voice coming from heaven knew where was demanding from him the dearest thing he had on earth. He would have liked to touch the young man to assure himself that this was a living creature.

Ida drew herself upright and moved away from her father's arms. She went up to Marton and pressed her warm lips at the base of his throat, just where the living pulse throbbed.

"Don't let's mention it to your mother to-night," the notary said to Ida. "As your aunt's here, I expect you'd rather tell your mother when she's alone."

Ida did not reply. She kept her head pressed against Marton's shoulder. She was thanking God from the depths of her heart that she had been born for such unimaginable happiness.

16

Baby ate nervously and, as she did so, she felt faintly resentful. There was something artificial about the calmness of the others. They talked of almost every subject but their remarks hardly brushed the surface of real life, like a dragon-fly skimming over a still pool. The menu seemed to her almost too frugal. When she had last been here, several years ago, each meal had been as important as a ceremony. At an invisible sign, blushing little maids had brought in the most delicate dishes which they presented with great deference.

Baby ate little, though she would have liked to have eaten more. She had just refused a magnificent apple, too big for her to eat the whole of it.

"Won't you halve that apple with me, Aunt Baby?" asked Theresa. Behind her deliciously frank smile, there was nothing but her childlike freshness. Baby passed her half the fruit, mentally forgiving her for the word "aunt." "That child, at least, isn't playing a part," she thought. "But she knows nothing. The others are hiding something from me—what?"

Sandor conducted himself at table like an appeased god. His coarsened features vividly reflected the warm light that glowed in his heart.

Ida held out the plate of fruit towards Marton like an offering. "Shall we share an apple too?"

Baby's eyes were arrested by Marton's outstretched hand: she felt a thrill of horror at the sight of the little pustules. She tried to

remember if she had washed her hands after shaking the young man's at the station.

"And Janos? Is he earning a good salary now?" inquired Anna.

"Oh, yes, very good," Baby replied. "He's the director of an independent Opera that's been set up in one of the theatres. Naturally, he's subsidised by the State."

"The State protects artists," observed Sandor, lighting a cigarette.

"And it needs experienced talent," added Baby.

"At any rate till the new Communist generation can replace it," Sandor went on smoothly, with the ingenuity of people who are not in the habit of lying.

Anna brusquely pushed back her chair and slid her folded table napkin into the ring.

"You talk as if there were no convinced Communists except among the young," she said dryly, as she got up from the table. "Let's go and sit on the terrace."

Out there, in their wickerwork arm-chairs, they took to silently contemplating the starry night.

"*I'm* going off to read," announced Theresa. "I've got a terribly exciting book. I kiss you all good night."

Baby stopped her on her way in.

"When you've finished your book. I can lend you another—highly interesting and instructive. Unless you know it already. It's Maxim Gorki's novel *Mother*."

"Thanks," replied Theresa vaguely, and vanished.

Baby lit a cigarette. In the flame of the lighter her hair and her face were the colour of honey.

"One needs to be born to reality," she said, inhaling the smoke, "not have to get used to it little by little."

The atmosphere about her became more oppressive. "They're provoking me," she thought. "They imagine I'm going to let out some compromising remark. What a come-down! Janos was right to warn me to mistrust them . . ."

"How do you find life here in the country?" she inquired, counter-attacking.

"Pleasant," said Anna, as if she were speaking on oath. "Extremely pleasant. The State does everything in its power to help the peasants."

"And your property?" asked Baby, leaning forward in the darkness. "Have you got the harvest in yet?"

"Anyone can see you're an ill-informed young woman from town, my dear sister-in-law," said the notary. "Don't you know a decent man doesn't keep his land for himself but renounces it in favour of the People? It's a good long time since we gave back our fifty hectares to the State. It was only our most elementary duty."

Baby felt suddenly dizzy. There, sitting in her sister's garden, under a calm sky, she was hearing remarks worthy of Törzs. She would have liked to cry out: "For heaven's sake, stop tormenting me with these grandiloquent, hollow words. I've come to you in despair, to implore your help, to tell you about all my miseries—my sleepless nights, my bedside lamp still alight at dawn, the nerve specialist—Törzs. Törzs above all, who watches me like a hunter waiting for his prey."

She would have liked to beg for sanctuary here, in this house that smelt so comfortingly of apples, because, when she arrived, she had had the feeling that she was going to sleep peacefully for the first time for months. All during her youth, she had constantly quarrelled with her sister, but to-day she had entered her house humble and timid. And Anna had genuinely welcomed her like a sister. Everything had only gone wrong from that moment when Sandor had called Anna away to tell her something. What could it have been? Had she made some frightful blunder? Whatever the reason, when Anna had come back and woken her up, her look had turned as harsh as her hand. "Is it possible," Baby asked herself, "that everything that happens in town and in the country is just part of the normal course of things and that I'm the only person who suffers so acutely?"

"Have you kept the vineyard?" she asked wearily.

"Yes, we've still got that," answered the notary. His voice

became soft and full of meaning as he stressed the little word "still." Baby raised her head: she was aware at last of a warm, human note that went straight to her heart. But Anna suddenly stood up, stifling a yawn.

"Let's go to bed . . . We're early birds in the country. I'm sleepy."

Baby reluctantly complied. A few moments later, she entered her room and switched on the light. It was not till then that she remembered that there was only one bathroom and that, to get to it, she would have to go through her sister's room. No, she really did not feel up to confronting Anna again. So she filled the basin from the heavy jug and washed in that. The water was so soft that it seemed almost a pity to dry oneself. She covered her face with a thick layer of skin food, slipped on her nightdress, turned out the light and got into bed. But the cool bed linen no longer induced the same magical drowsiness; she lay there with open eyes. She could not longer prevent herself from brooding over something that very rarely troubled her—her own futility in the midst of a complete social upheaval.

Was she anything but a broken branch, eddying helplessly in the torrent that was going to sweep her away? Others in such circumstances clasped their hands and prayed; but Baby had no faith. As a child, she had looked on God as a distant relative who remembered your existence once a year and sent you a Christmas tree garnished with presents. Once this illusion had been destroyed, her only notion of God was reduced to the tiresome obligation of being present at the interminable High Mass on Sundays. Never, up to now, had Baby really prayed. So, on this warm night, as once again she tried vainly to sleep, there was nothing in her heart but emptiness and the feeling of vertigo that seizes a person lost in the mountains when he sees the gulfs that yawn at his feet.

She sat up in bed and ran her tongue over her dry lips. The insipid taste of the skin-cream penetrated into her mouth.

"My God," she whispered in anguish, "How . . . oh, *how* I long to sleep!"

17

" Is HE really going to marry her? " exclaimed Anna incredulously. She leant forward so eagerly that one heavy breast thrust up out of her nightdress.

" Yes, he'll marry her," said the notary.

Sitting on his wife's bed, he felt both constrained and embarrassed, like a respectable bourgeois whom the fever of a Sunday night has impelled into a bedroom in a shady hotel.

Anna lay back again and propped herself up on her elbow.

" But, for goodness' sake, talk," she said. " Tell me all the details. When and how did it all happen? Was it the boy who spoke to you first? "

The notary shuddered. He had become so ultra-sensitive that certain words physically hurt him. Spoken by Anna, the word " boy " took on something degradingly sexual, as if she had said: " Was it the male who spoke to you? "

" Of course it was," he growled. " He's a thoroughly nice boy. He's devoted to Ida . . . At least we can be sure that she'll belong to someone who'll give her his name, that she'll never be alone and abandoned in life . . ."

Anna lost her temper.

" To hear you talk, anyone would get a fine idea of our family life . . . ' Alone in life ' . . . The expression one would use of a foundling . . ."

" Foundling," echoed the notary, with an odd mixture of joy and pain. " For me she *is* someone who's been found . . . a child, a soul. She's my whole life . . . It makes me happy to think

that, when I'm no longer there, she'll have Marton to look after her . . ."

Anna sat up again.

"Oh, you're intolerable with your overwhelming passion for that child. And the more it becomes an obsession, the unkinder you are to me. Really, I sometimes wonder what right you assume you have to love her as much as all that . . ."

She broke off, after that cruel shaft. As she lay back on her pillows again, it was obvious that she was trying to find words that would wound her husband without hurting herself at the same time. Sandor stood up and went over to the door.

"I think," said Anna, "that I ought to tell Ida the circumstances of her birth. After all, one can't keep certain facts secret for ever."

The notary turned deathly white and stood rooted to the spot. For how long had he been dreading that moment? Destiny seemed to be implacably tracking him down, driving him to the fatal act. Never before had that inner voice cried out so insistently: "Kill her . . . choke those blasphemous words in her throat before she breaks the last tie that keeps you on this earth—before she's changed Ida's daughterly love into dismayed pity . . ." "Shall I strangle her?" he thought, feeling his tongue cleave to his dry palate. He had to make a superhuman effort to turn the knob he held in his hand and drag himself out of the room.

Out in the garden, he lurched so fast down the slope that he risked falling at every step before he reached the little bench. The cool breeze that came up from the lake dried the drops of sweat that beaded his forehead. He collapsed on the bench and remained there a long time, his mind a total blank, until at last a physical feeling of cold roused him from his stupor.

The days drifted by at Boglar in a kind of torpor. Autumn was quietly creeping in, scattering its golden veils over the countryside. Foliage turned overnight from green to orange and crimson, then drooped more and more sadly over the faded gardens.

Baby went about the house in a permanent mood of perplexity. No one took much notice of her. She wandered through the rooms

as if the help she was seeking were concealed somewhere among the old pieces of furniture. Sitting in one of the arm-chairs in the drawing-room, leaning her head back against the cushions, she would listen to the distant, muffled sounds of the various household activities. Ida and Theresa spent all their time on the beach, enjoying the last of the sunny days. Baby had gone down with them once but even the sight of the two girls frisking about in the water had not induced her to go in herself. She had stayed on the beach, miserably conscious of her absurdly white skin and her childishly thin arms, until she had developed a violent headache. Ever since then, she had remained more or less confined to the house. They had all grown used to her presence and no longer paid any attention to it: all that she signified now was one more place at the table and one more cigarette to light.

After the political conversation of the first evening, everyone carefully avoided any allusion to politics. Baby continued to live among them like a bright ghost, like a speck of dust suspended in a shaft of sunlight. Her stay prolonged itself, but each time she suggested leaving, the two girls exclaimed in unison: "Oh, but you *must* stay for the St. Anna Ball!" It seemed extraordinarily odd to talk about a ball in their present circumstances . . .

"Very well, I'll wait for the ball," she would answer mechanically, thinking that her stay was like being shipwrecked on a comfortable desert island.

Life was going on in Budapest. Her mother-in-law was cooking; Janos was conducting his orchestra; the concierge was spying. Perhaps Klein was politely inquiring when Madame would be coming home . . . But, in reality, everyone was quietly going on with his or her own little life, far removed from the castaway.

These last days, Sandor had been so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he sometimes walked through the drawing-room without even noticing his sister-in-law was there. He walked about the house a great deal, appearing unexpectedly as if he were urgently looking for someone.

"Where's Ida?" he would ask the maid or Theresa. And he

would look relieved when they told him that Ida had gone to see Marton's mother or was down on the beach. He would straighten himself up then, as if an anxious burden had been lifted from his shoulders, and return to the office.

One day, Baby was just coming out of her bedroom when she saw Sandor standing with his ear glued to Anna's door. Baby flattened herself against the door frame and the two of them stood there, both on the alert, both holding their breath, for several moments. That waiting there together in that mutual, anxious silence was, in fact, the only intimate human contact Baby experienced during her entire stay. Sandor had not knocked at his wife's door but he had gone away with a silent, catlike tread—he moved surprisingly lightly for a man of his build. Baby had never dared to ask him anything at all about this incident.

Then came the ball. They had decided to arrive at it about ten o'clock. Nevertheless, during dinner, the notary displayed signs of nervousness.

"Let's hurry up," he said. "Before going to the inn, we could make a little detour and go round by the Casino."

Anna and her daughters stared at him in surprise.

"By the Casino?" they exclaimed, almost simultaneously.

"Why not?" said Sandor, a trifle embarrassed. "It's a fine night and I'd like to show Baby where the ball used to be held before the war."

"Oh, don't do it specially for me," protested Baby, dreading she would have to walk too far.

But there had been a note of decision in Sandor's voice and Baby was dimly aware that she was only the pretext for this moonlight expedition. The splendid juicy apples remained untouched that night. Baby went upstairs to fetch a warm jacket and they all set off.

They took the main road as far as the little fir wood. There, instead of going down to the lake, they took a path to their left. The notary walked ahead, followed by the two girls—Anna walked behind Baby. A quarter of an hour later, they emerged on a

long, concrete avenue that gleamed softly in the moonlight. On either side of the road, loomed the shapes of villas keeping watch over unkempt gardens.

" Why is it so silent? " Baby asked in a low voice, stopping in the middle of the avenue. " Where are all the people? "

The notary's features were pallid in the moonlight. He came and bent right over her before replying:

" The people who lived along here, my dear sister-in-law, were the upper crust, the very cream of pre-war society. They have had to disappear, leaving nothing behind them but a headless mass that has lost its bearings. The people who used to come here before the war just to gape at them have looted the villas. Now they daren't even venture near the place any more—they'd be too frightened of meeting ghosts . . ."

" You wanted to show Baby the Casino," said Anna emphatically. She spoke loudly and the walls that were still standing threw back the echo of her voice.

The notary proceeded on his way, as if impelled by some unseen force. Only Theresa's light laugh slackened the nervous tension for a moment.

" Look! " she said, with positively childish glee, " I've got a shadow! The moon's so bright you'd think it was daytime! "

Baby lowered her eyes and gazed at the asphalt road: her heart was beating at twice its normal speed. She had the feeling that, behind them, trailed a grey, shapeless cloud—another group of walkers: the ghosts.

" Why don't any motor cars come along here? " she asked, simply for the sake of saying something.

" This road," they told her, " was built for the privileged few who lived here. The crowd has always swarmed along down below, by the railway lines. Going this way means they have to make a detour. What's more, they're frightened . . . People always avoid cemeteries at night. . . ."

The silver road narrowed and slender birches fluttered their sparse leaves. A drift of cloud sailed towards the full moon.

The deserted building of the Casino rose up forlornly at the end of the road. The iron fence that surrounded the park was twisted as if a capricious giant had been amusing himself by bending its bars. They entered the enclosure at the spot where there had once stood a great wrought-iron gate.

"Where's the gate?" inquired Baby.

"It's been stolen," Ida answered promptly. "The front door has been stolen too."

They made their way, in the shadow of the tall fir-trees, to the flight of white steps at the entrance.

"This was where the women used to step out of their motor cars," explained the notary, like a tourist guide. "Women in long white dresses, scented and all covered with jewels, with priceless furs slipping off their shoulders. Their escorts, in full evening-dress, would follow them . . . Let's go up the steps so that I can show Baby where we should have come to-night if . . ."

"Oh, be quiet," Anna interrupted in a hissing voice. "I've had enough of this calling-up of spirits!"

"Calling-up of spirits on a dung heap!" The notary took up her words with unaccustomed violence. "Don't be frightened, my children . . . There's nothing to be afraid of. There's nothing but emptiness here. The doors have been torn off their hinges, the parquet floors have been burnt for firewood, the windows are broken. The ballroom is full of dried horse-droppings. They turned the place into a stable."

"Let's go," said Anna brusquely. "I've had more than enough of this walk. And to think the girls might have been dancing by now!"

The husband nodded assent.

"Certainly, they might be dancing by now. In any case, they very soon *will* be dancing. But, good Lord, in what a place!"

They returned to the village in silence.

At the tables—or rather at the rustic trestles put up in the garden of the inn—shabby chairs and long wooden benches awaited the guests. The trees were hung with red and yellow electric fairy

lights. This lighting turned all complexions to a neutral, disturbing shade. The orchestra, consisting of three gipsies, was playing a languorous, popular tune. The dead-white face of the assistant notary surged up from the motley crowd.

"Here, sir, I've kept a table for you in this corner. Follow me . . ."

As they made their way with difficulty through the dancers, Baby felt like a fly caught in a spider's web. Moving like that, wouldn't they attract the attention of the spider who must be lurking here or there? Nevertheless, they safely reached their table and sat down on the narrow benches; the two girls opposite Baby and Anna beside her husband.

Sandor caught the innkeeper's eye and raised two fingers, then five. The latter made a sign that he understood but it was quite some time before he paid any attention to their group.

Ida was watching the dancers with a heavy heart. Marton was dancing with Melinda. She was talking to him, very low. No doubt in order to hear her better, his face was very close to his partner's cheek. The music prevented one from hearing what they were saying. Ida felt her mouth go dry; her whole body was convulsed with the fury of her frantic jealousy. How could she make her presence known to Marton? If shame had not restrained her, she would have cleaved her way through the crowd to get to him. But she had to stay there motionless with the others, with a smile fixed on her lips, hoping no one would notice her distress. Marton had asked her to marry him; they belonged to one another. Was it not intolerable to see him like that, with his arms round another girl? Ida gave her father a look at once despairing and deeply reproachful; if they had not gone that long way round, for no reason at all, she would have been dancing all this while with her fiancé . . .

"What's the matter, little one?" asked the notary. His eyes were so understanding that Ida would have liked to have confided her most secret thoughts to him. But, just at that moment, the innkeeper stretched out his hairy hand in front of them to deposit

five glasses and two bottles of wine on the table. The notary filled the glasses and hands were held out to take them. Sedately, they drank the cool, slightly acrid wine.

Sandor stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to ask my big daughter to do me the honour of dancing with me," he replied, bowing to Ida with the slightly exaggerated deference a man of fifty, white at the temples, shows to a young and lovely girl.

The violins struck up a waltz in the autumn night that was beginning to turn chilly. Baby hummed the tune and covered her shoulders with her warm jacket.

A gust of wind, laden with the musky smell of the lake, rumpled her hair.

The young peasant Istvan, the one who used to bring her home in his cart after working in the harvest fields, came and bowed before Theresa. The young girl blushed and pulled up the low neck of her dress a trifle, as if to hide her small, barely yet developed breasts, before she followed her partner.

The assistant notary asked Anna to dance just as Sandor and Ida reached the lawn that served as a dance floor. The crowd was so tightly packed that they could not manage to get near Marton. Melinda had seen the notary's family the moment they arrived but had taken care not to tell Marton. On the contrary, she had pressed closer to Marton with deliberate provocation, darting languorous looks at him. The waltz swept the couples into a wilder and wilder rhythm; the beat seemed to become a compulsive thing, driving the musicians ever faster and faster to its insistence. The violinist's forehead was damp as it bent over his violin; the gipsy seated at his zither hammered frantically at the strings, while their companion seemed to be demanding that his viola should echo the reverberating depths of a gulf that had opened at his feet.

The panting dancers had not had time to stop, the last chords had not died away before the musicians struck up another dance.

" Will you give me the pleasure of the next dance? " the notary asked Melinda. The new couples were already forming.

" I love you," murmured Ida. " Didn't you see us arrive then? "

" Yes, I did, darling. But I couldn't leave Melinda stuck there in the middle of a waltz and no one came to take her off my hands."

Ida danced badly and jerkily. Her double-soled shoe was like a ball and chain.

" Their engagement party will be in three weeks' time," said the notary, smiling at Melinda. " We invite you here and now, my dear Melinda. We went all Ida's girl friends to come."

" I congratulate you," said Melinda. Her face gave nothing away; she even found the strength to smile. Only a faint quiver of her lower lip betrayed what she was feeling.

An insinuating tango pressed bodies close against each other as effectively as a cunning procuress.

The fairy lamps hung a little lower from the slackened wires. The assistant notary had swallowed over a litre of wine. More and more urgently he longed to bite Anna's neck that was the colour of amber and downy as a peach.

The gipsies rested at last. The dancers flowed back to the tables. They had put on extensions and brought out extra benches. The crowd was denser than ever. Baby was squeezed in between the notary and a member of the Communal Council, the tractor mechanic.

" I never imagined that one day I'd be enjoying myself at a dance, cheek by jowl with you, sir," said the young mechanic to the notary.

His pimply face shone with sweat; the absence of a front tooth turned his smile into something like a grimace.

" What could be more natural than our all being here together? " said the notary heartily. He leant forward affably and shook the young man's hand.

" Your health, Comrade Notary! " cried the young man, delighted. The two of them emptied their glasses.

Everyone was drinking and the wine quickened the flow of the

blood in their veins. It went to their heads, it threw a veil over their troubles, it calmed and soothed their jangled nerves.

Ida's leg touched Marton's and trembled at the contact.

"Can I fill your glass?" asked the young man. There were satiny glints in the depths of his eyes.

The gipsies granted the dancers a few moments respite by playing some old folk-songs.

"*Softly flows the water of the Maros . . .*
Come, lay your head on my shoulder, my love . . .

Anna began by merely humming the couplet, then, carried away by her own excitement, she started to sing it.

"No," said Sandor, nudging her elbow. "Don't sing . . . you'll make yourself conspicuous. Can't you imagine this splendid headline in the paper: 'Beautiful wife of reactionary notary enjoys herself?'"

That cruelly lucid remark exiled her a thousand miles from the land of peace and love where the wings of wine had carried her. The idea that she had given herself away overwhelmed her. To cover up her distress, she mechanically recited the words of the song, drawing out the syllables.

No, no, I cannot, for I have another lover,
When the grapes are gathered, they will hold my wedding feast.

Anna felt so utterly alone to-night that she no longer felt anything for the man beside her beyond a vague sense of pity and contempt. She gripped her glass between her fingers and no longer dared to raise her eyes for she was convinced everyone had noticed her husband's intervention. The Badacsony wine gleamed softly in the glass before her, like drops of golden rain that had been gathered up with jealous fervour. Then Anna caught sight of Marton and Ida who were dancing quite close to her. In spite of all the dryness of her heart, a flood of tenderness rushed over her.

Sandor was dancing with Baby, a Baby who was taking small, nervous steps and pretending to enjoy herself. Her head was

swimming slightly and she was talking a great deal, without paying much attention to what she said. They returned to the table and Baby sat down again opposite Theresa. She studied the girl and thought that her dark-haired niece was exactly like what she had been herself at sixteen: tall and slim, full of hopes and dreams and already sensual without knowing it. This idea pained her. To-night, face to face with this young girl who resembled her, she felt all the ironies of life. How could she escape the consciousness of her own decline, the apprehension of old age that was already menacing her . . .? The cigarette began to tremble between her fingers; nervously, she emptied her glass, as if forgetfulness lay at the bottom of it. Her bleached hair seemed to her like a wig; she felt ill-at-ease in her tight-fitting dress. A secret envy sprang up from the very depths of her being; a burning, completely feminine jealousy . . . She would have liked to get rid of her own body, so rich in experience yet for ever unsatisfied, and to take on Theresa's: to live all over again the fever of first love, first kisses . . . To begin all that over again with hair innocent of dye and a heart bursting with joy and hope. . . .

" Long live the Republic! " exclaimed the secretary of the Party. He was extremely sober.

His gaze wandered over the company, lowering in turn on one individual or another until everyone had returned his " Hear, hear! " in a more or less convincing tone.

The innkeeper unfurled a red flag adorned with the hammer and sickle and promptly spread it over a table. In a corner, a man began to weep, for no apparent reason. He must have been overcome by drink . . . His sobs could be heard above the music. People stared at him, then surrounded him. He got up and left the inn. He managed to walk with a steady step, his head held high. But his tears still went on running all down his cheeks and his stiff collar was already soaked.

" Who's that? " asked Baby.

" A peasant in the village," answered Sandor, without further comment.

The bottles of wine multiplied on the table. The assistant notary gazed at Anna with more and more tender insistence. To avoid that gaze, Anna leant over towards Ida and spoke to her under her breath.

The notary became nervous and fidgety. He interrupted them several times. Finally, to break up their conversation, he asked his daughter to dance.

"What was your mother saying to you?" he inquired, trying to make his voice sound detached.

"She was talking to me about Marton."

The girl pushed back a stray lock of hair that had fallen over her forehead. Her father noticed those slender fingers; no one in the family had a hand like that, no one. Who was the man from whom she had inherited that exquisite hand?

"I'm completely tight, Papa," Ida stated. "I'm giddy . . ."

"We'll go home in a moment," he said, "but don't let's stop in the middle of our dance."

"Papa," said the girl. "We've decided to go and work in the factory if there's no other work to be had. They'd never give Marton a job in an office; the authorities don't think him a person to be trusted."

The notary was tempted to pick up his daughter in his arms.

"As long as I'm still alive, my daughter isn't going to work in a factory," he said.

Ida found that her head was swimming.

"Do you think all this will end one day and we shall be able to begin to live again as we did before the war?"

"Be quiet, be quiet," whispered the notary, pretending he was humming a song. He went on, to the tune the orchestra was playing:

"We'll talk about it again when we get home."

"Long live the Republic!" yelled an aggressive voice.

Marton, who had remained sitting at the table, turned round. His look met that of the Party Secretary. No one had answered. The pallid faces, from which all smiles had vanished, stared into

space like automatons. The stimulating fire of the wine had given way to a heaviness that verged on nausea. Already, some were getting up to depart home. The notary's family prepared to leave too. Baby took Sandor's arm; Anna and Ida ranged themselves on either side of Marton. Little Theresa brought up the rear with her young peasant.

The moon was hidden behind a great cloud. The trees moaned and a blustering wind tore off armfuls of leaves; the lake was now no more than a dark, almost invisible, sheet of glass. Baby, tottering a little because she had drunk too much wine, clutched on to the notary's rough jacket. The smell of black tobacco reminded her of Törzs's kiss, and that kiss became once more something so actual and compelling that she felt she was already the police officer's mistress. Perhaps she wanted nothing to stop the accomplishment of that degradation. A profound discouragement drove her to wish that all were said and done and that her depravity were complete.

Anna plunged ahead of the others into the autumn night, her mind empty of all thought. She too was tired and depressed.

"Anna," called out the notary—and she slowed down a little—"Won't you wait for us? Do stay with us?"

There was a certain tenderness in the appeal. Without a word, Anna slackened her pace and fell into step with her husband.

"Poor Papa," thought Ida, deeply touched. "He does everything he can to make me happy. How young he is at heart and how he understands everything . . .! How young he is . . .!" She said softly to Marton:

"I'm *so* fond of my father."

Those words, though they were spoken gaily, went straight to the young man's heart. For the first time, he felt really committed, really drawn into the orbit of another family.

And, thus, they all proceeded onwards in the darkness towards their sleep—and towards their fate.

18

THREE DAYS after the ball, Baby returned to Budapest.

Klein was waiting for her at the station, paler and more agitated than ever.

"Agi's not singing any longer at the Troika," he whispered in Baby's ear, as the tram carried them back to the centre of the town. "They've had her dismissed. The song's prohibited, too."

"What song?" asked Baby, puzzled.

"*Yiddisher Mamma*," said Klein. "Apparently, it's a subversive song that excited the public."

Baby had no desire to know more. In any case, such a silence reigned in the tram that everyone seemed to be trying to overhear what they were whispering.

"You can tell me all about it when we get home, my dear Arpad," she said with a smile.

They finished their journey in silence, like the others.

Baby shivered as she entered the hall of the building and mounted the stairs. The fact that she had returned home seemed to her like a tacit agreement, like putting her signature to a contract whose terms she did not yet know.

Her mother-in-law greeted her in the doorway of the flat with an ambiguous smile on her lips.

"Well, so you're back! I hope you've had a really good rest. *You're* lucky, you can leave everything and, all the same, the work gets done and the dinner cooked. After all, if it weren't for that,

you wouldn't be able to go off on holiday . . . Janos will be home soon. He went out with Törzs—they're probably at the Opera."

" Everything's going splendidly for the theatre, Madame," put in Klein, a little embarrassed at not having mentioned this before. " We've got the money we needed. There's only one tiresome thing: something must be the matter with my voice for the Maestro said I can only sing the part of *Rosenkavalier* as understudy . . . which means only on Mondays."

" Very well, I'll go to the performance on a Monday," said Baby absently.

She was thinking of Törzs.

" Shall I make a cup of coffee? " inquired her mother-in-law.

" Yes, do. I'd like that awfully. While you're making it, I'll take my dresses out of the suitcases."

" Oh! " exclaimed the old woman, rising from her chair. " My feet . . . my feet are hurting me to death. But, of course, *I* haven't had time to have a good rest . . ."

" *Have* I had a rest? " retorted Baby angrily. " Sharing the daily life of another family—that's not what I'd call resting. Do you know what a real rest is, Mamma? A hotel! A porter who keeps your keys. A chambermaid who comes when you ring the bell. Being able to talk or not to talk, to eat and sleep as and when you want to."

The old woman turned crimson with rage.

" You're as impertinent as you're spoilt; nothing's ever good enough for you. But you just see what you'll see when it comes to your turn . . ."

Baby was shaking all over with fury.

" Go on, don't let *me* stop you, Mamma . . . What do you mean? What's going to happen when it comes to ' my turn '? What about you? Aren't *you* frightened? Can't anything happen to you in *your* turn? "

Klein broke in timidly:

" Madame, I think the Maestro's just come in."

Janos burst like a whirlwind into the room where the little group was gathered.

"Hallo, Baby," he said, with a broad smile.

His eyes, however, remained serious and they looked a trifle haggard. He tried to kiss his wife on the mouth but she adroitly turned away. Janos, annoyed by his frustrated effort, revenged himself by applying his large palm to Baby's behind.

"There, you spoilt little thing! So you've come home, have you, you little gate-crasher?"

"Oh, this is intolerable," muttered Baby between her teeth.

"What's intolerable?"

She exploded. Her voice shot up to a shriller and shriller register.

"Don't let's say one more word about this rest! Mamma started off by greeting me on the doorstep as if I ought to ask to be forgiven for something. Weren't you both absolutely delighted to have me out of the way . . . Go on, admit it!"

Janos's mother went up to him.

"Son, if I die to-night of a fit of apoplexy, you'll know who's the cause of it. Look at the vein in my temple . . . I can feel it swelling . . . throbbing . . ."

"That'll do!" roared the conductor. "I'm fed up, coming home to find the two of you going for each other like cat and dog. There are more important things to worry about at this moment. One can't waste one's energy in family squabbles. One's got to keep it for other things that may happen . . ."

"*I'm* not strong," said Baby sulkily. "I haven't got any reserves of energy."

Janos's face suddenly became repulsive, as if some loathsome thing he saw had brimmed over from his eyes and spilled all over his features.

"You'll need it all the same . . . all the strength you've got, my pet. Because to-morrow or the day after, you're going to spend an entire afternoon choosing furniture. The loft of the Ministry of National Security contains all the furniture confiscated

from the condemned who have been executed. As we don't possess even one decent arm-chair, they've decided to let us have some . . . It was Törzs's idea, but he wants *you* to choose what we need."

His mother suddenly recovered her calm.

" Can I come with you, son? My divan-bed's horrible. There's a broken spring that sticks into my flesh. And my chair's all coming to pieces."

" Do you realise we're being offered the furniture of people condemned to death? " Baby asked serenely.

She had guessed, long before she arrived home, that she would hear some disturbing things but this was far worse than anything she had imagined.

Her mother-in-law shrugged her shoulders.

" Well, what of it? That doesn't stop the spring from hurting me. Janos," she added, turning to her son, " do let me go too. I'm sure Baby will choose a bad bed. She always envies me for sleeping well."

Klein had withdrawn into a corner of the room; the shadows under his eyes turned bluer and bluer.

" So these are Christians," he thought, disgusted. " In this room we're all of us Christians . . ." He did not want to look any farther.

" You oughtn't to have heard all that, Arpad," said the conductor. " But I trust your discretion. There's no point in other people knowing all this."

Klein nodded to show that he acquiesced, then began to speak as fast as if he were reciting a part he had learnt by heart. As it happened, what he had to say did not sound out of place in the atmosphere of the moment.

" I've already told you, Madame . . ."

" Call me Baby."

Klein went on, in some confusion:

" I've already explained to you, Madame, that Agi can't sing any more at the Troika. So she's transformed the three rooms

she shares with her family into a private club. The old clients of the Troika go there to see her again and to prevent her from dying of hunger. Naturally, it's only friends who go there. In any case, it would be better if Törzs didn't know anything about it . . . And we must also go and see the countess in the hospital. In her lucid moments, Agi says, she only asks for clean nightdresses."

Baby was startled.

"Clean nightdresses?"

"Yes, and Agi's already taken her one. Every time she has milk injections, her temperature goes up and she sweats at every pore. It's after these attacks she needs dry linen and the hospital hasn't got enough. Even the sheets have hardly time to get dry between two attacks. After all, the countess's disease concerns all of us; it wasn't her fault she caught it. It's my impression that this whole era is syphilitic. The whole of humanity is in process of rotting away, sir."

Janos made an impatient gesture.

"Don't talk like an Old Testament prophet, Klein. We've quite enough troubles without your Jeremiads."

Baby suddenly felt very tired. She went back to her own room, locked the door and sat down on her bed. Something white was sticking out from under one of the cushions on the divan: a dirty handkerchief that did not belong to her.

"His mother," she thought, and she beat the cushion with her fists in an access of impotent rage. "She's been sleeping in my bed while I was away."

That night, Janos took no more notice of his wife than if she had still been away. He was nervous. An anxiety that he dared not define was clutching at his heart.

The rough sketch of a score lay scattered on the open piano along with half a dozen pencils. He had suggested the work in progress to the National Group of Cultural Progress, the very organisation that was subsidising his theatre. They had given him two months to complete the whole thing.

In the course of the negotiations, he had asked for more time but the president of the group had been inflexible:

" At the most, you may shorten your symphony, Comrade, but it must be finished within the time-limit. The theory of the muses and inspiration was all right for the bourgeois world. All that is needed is to have the will to bring off something successful, the joy of creation in your heart and a certain musical training." He glanced at the calendar. " To-day is the 20th of September. Your symphony must be finished by the 20th of November. The Voluntary Orchestra of the Police will be responsible for performing it. Ten days will be plenty of time for the rehearsals, so the work can be presented to the public on the occasion of December the first. I presume you have not forgotten that the first of December is the date of a joyful celebration, since it is the birthday of the Party Secretary. And, if all goes well, Comrade, we may eventually realise your dream and send you on a study-trip to Moscow."

Janos bit his lips, then he was alarmed by his own instinctive reaction which was that of a frightened man. He ran his thick forefinger over his lip:

" I've a little fever pimple on my mouth—odd how much it tickles," he said. Then he added hastily: " It's a great honour for me to think that my *Joyous Symphony* will be performed on such a solemn occasion. And I am glad to have been able to express my gratitude to our great Party in music."

The other became impatient.

" Don't make any personal merit out of that, Comrade. You're doing nothing but your bare duty. You ought to have thought of it sooner. A man who forgets the Party is like the child who forgets its mother—an ungrateful wretch."

" That bitch, liberty," Janos thought with rancour. "Whatever you do, she's never satisfied."

He straightened himself up with a jerk and flung up his clenched fist.

" Liberty, Comrade! I'll come and see you as soon as I'm ready. Who knows, perhaps I shall succeed in getting it finished before the deadline . . ."

The president of the group displayed not the faintest enthusiasm.

" That's not necessary," he remarked. " The twentieth of November is soon enough. The Party is generous and does not expect the impossible."

" Liberty! " repeated Janos, as he retired, utterly crushed.

There was nothing left for him to say but that word, everlastingly repeated with the exact opposite of its meaning in this daily life consisting of nothing but rules, prohibitions, traps and continual violations of the most elementary rights.

After this conversation, the composer had spent hours staring at his music paper and at the calendar prominently displayed on the piano. In the theatre, he was more nervously irritable than ever; shouting and storming and lashing even the women with his sarcastic remarks. The women were not in the least surprised; after all, they were already accustomed to putting up with every kind of vile behaviour from men in the name of sex equality. Only yesterday, Janos had violently apostrophised the leading lady:

" What notion have you of your part, to sing it with such frigidity? If you sing like that because you're still a virgin, go home, sleep with the first man you can pick up, and come back tomorrow . . ."

The young singer gritted her teeth, but was not dismayed. Life had long ago dried up her tears. She knew that she must put up with anything from the musical director since he was not only her boss, but, more important still, a member of the Party—a man who had " arrived " and had influence.

In the director's home, the music paper awaited him: hungry for notes, indifferent and hostile. The absence of Baby had done nothing to improve his state of mind; he remained as frightened as ever. Only one thing reassured him a little—Törzs's proposal about the furniture. " It's a sign that he must really trust me," he

told himself and this thought calmed him for a few hours. But soon he was once more in tortures of anxiety; he felt as if he had a brand on his forehead that distinguished him from true Party members, the ones who were genuinely convinced. He would have had not the least hesitation in lending himself to some odious action, simply to prove his unconditional allegiance to the Party and to be free of his incessant fears.

Often, in his nightmares, he saw himself accused of high treason, bound hand and foot to a chair, with an arc lamp glaring into his eyes, explaining that he had done nothing wrong and expecting every moment to be beaten up. Yet they never did hit him; he simply waited, rigid with apprehension, for the beating to begin. Half mad with terror, dribbling all down his clothes, he would keep repeating in a choking voice that he had never spoken ill of the occupying powers, the " liberators ", that even in his private correspondence he had always written the word " Russian " with a capital R because he liked and admired the Russians. He would gladly have licked the soldiers' hands like a faithful dog; he would even have licked the soles of their boots. If they wanted to kick him, he would not even protest; they could even make him admit that he only had a muzzle—yes, a muzzle—not a human face. Yes, yes, everyone was justified in being against him, but would they pardon him all the same for continuing to exist? . . . he swore that he never wrote the word " Russian " except with a capital . . .

He would wake from these nightmares, moaning and screaming, his pyjamas stuck to his body with the sweat of his appalling fear. He would get up, drink a glass of water, then lie down again and force himself to count slowly so as to get to sleep once more. But as soon as he grew drowsy, his apprehension clutched at him again. What would happen if the symphony were not ready in time? They would make out that he was committing sabotage, deliberately avoiding paying homage to this memorable anniversary. For the Secretary of the Party was no mere mortal but one of the components of History . . .

At that, Janos would leap out of bed and go to his piano. Discordant arpeggios rippled through his mind: in spirit he could hear the choirs singing. The orchestra was only to provide a supporting framework for the male and female voices that must express the joy of men, women and children. But what *was* joy? He tried vainly to revive the distant memory of the joys of other days. The three post-war years seemed as if they must have been multiplied by ten . . . He could vaguely remember the joy he had felt when the director of the Academy of Music had laid his hand on the shoulder of the young prizewinner and told him: "You have a great deal of talent and a splendid future ahead of you . . ." Where was that future? There had been no splendid future, only torturing anxiety. All about him, the solid ground had turned into a shifting quicksand. If ever he did go off on that famous study-trip to Moscow, he would be terrified all the time of ruining himself by some unlucky word. His language was not that of the initiates, the real communists. *They* did not lose themselves in fine phrases: their speech was categorical, for their ideology permitted of no sentimentality. Their sentences followed on with impregnable logic; there were no superfluous adjectives, no gratuitous sentiments. It was only the neophytes who so loudly proclaimed an almost carnal passion for the Party, as if they hoped to repudiate their entire bourgeois past by their fervent words. The Party observed the neophytes over a long stretch of years. It allowed them to disport themselves in newspaper articles, extravagantly eulogistic pamphlets and fatuous poems. The Party waited, judged and then deliberately made its choice. It retained the elements it considered worthy of interest and swept away those who had not really got this ideology in their blood. Janos was one of those who so loudly proclaimed their good faith in order to use it as a shield to protect their quaking bourgeois bodies. Would he be retained among the elect? Would he have the joy of speaking the language of the initiated?

Janos bent over his score and composed breathlessly, like a hunted man with his back to the wall. He was sitting down, yet

his heart was pounding as if it would burst in this race against time where the stake might well be his own life.

The light from the lamp on the table was as pallid as that of the moon outside. Janos collapsed over the piano.

" My son can't sleep, any more than I can," thought his mother. The broken spring was hurting her. She turned over and thought of the new bed for which she hoped.

19

The corridors in the National Security building were so long, so numerous and so like each other that Baby felt as if she had been walking along them for hours. She walked in silence beside Törzs and wondered whether they were not returning through ones they had been down before. Everything inside this square block that looked out on to four streets seemed identical.

Everywhere there were those same endless corridors, the same dim electric lights, the same office doors and iron doors. Occasionally a door banged or a few scraps of conversation would be heard. At times, the only sound was the tapping of Baby's high heels. They went up one staircase, down another, up a third and entered a roomy lift. Törzs shut the gate and pressed a button. There was a dull rumbling; the lift shot up, then stopped. They got out. Törzs did not close the gate; the lift remained there as they walked away.

Yet another corridor; yet another little iron door. Törzs turned a key and they entered. He raised his hand and switched on a feeble electric bulb. Baby recoiled and found herself backing against the door that had already closed behind her. In front of her, a cemetery of old furniture stretched as far as eye could see. There was something of everything: arm-chairs, sofas, monumental cupboards adorned with carvings, rolled-up carpets, and, in the distance, some fifty yards away, a gigantic mirror. Fascinated, Baby advanced, through the piled-up furniture, towards the dusty glass. She saw her reflection coming forward to meet her and shivered as if she were meeting her own ghost.

The furniture of the condemned surrounded her, silent and sombre. So many tombstones . . . Törzs ran his hand over the unusually high back of one arm-chair.

"Do you recognise this chair?"

Baby recognised it merely from the tone of Törzs's voice. Those narrow, high-backed arm-chairs had stood in their cousin Jenö's drawing-room. She had sat in them herself. So had Janos and even her mother-in-law. But, most of all, the dead man . . .

"You can have them," said Törzs impassively, "that way, they'll stay in the family. The carpets are here too. You can have them as well."

Baby could not speak: she felt sick and giddy. Then, involuntarily, she muttered:

"We need a bed for my mother-in-law."

Her words were dictated neither by kindness nor by fear. They were simply the ones that came into her mind.

"A bed? We've got heaps of them. The shop's well stocked. We're burying a whole epoch here."

They wandered through the loft. It was enormous, running under the roof in the entire length of the building.

"Would you like that one?" asked Törzs, pointing to a great Renaissance bed. Even its mattress was still on it. Against the wall, just by the bed, stood a still-life picture: a bleeding pheasant lying on a dark table.

Törzs drew the young woman to him and whispered in her ear: "It's good to be alive, isn't it? It's good to have survived the great purge and to be able to choose from the inheritance?"

Baby wanted to wrench herself away from his rough embrace but she did not succeed. Törzs flung her down on the Renaissance bed. The Party badge, pinned in Törzs's buttonhole scratched her on one breast. She turned her head away and fixed her eyes on the pheasant with the blood-dabbled neck. She had the hallucination that nothing of her remained alive but her head. Her severed head had been thrown into the guillotine basket and was staring at what was being done to her helpless body.

How long went by before Baby sat up on the bed and looked at the man who was smoking a cigarette beside her? She tried to marshal her thoughts. Why was she so disturbed? Had she not, in her heart, expected to come to this sooner or later? Had she not, at times, tacitly consented to it? The irrevocable had happened: she was Törzs's mistress. And Törzs was the Party; therefore, in her body, she belonged to the Party.

Now that she had given this final pledge—or rather had it snatched from her—was she not safe? No, she would not have to go and work in a factory; she could go on wearing high heels . . . She felt herself becoming audacious enough, sufficiently sure of herself to burst out laughing in a morgue.

She turned to Törzs and asked gaily:

"To whom did this bed belong?"

The police officer averted his eyes.

"To the Fascist Minister of Internal Affairs."

"Give me a cigarette too," said the young woman, bending over him. Then she went on:

"He came back of his own accord in 1945, didn't he?"

Törzs gave her a light.

"Yes. He came back because he hoped to save his fortune."

A secret devil prompted Baby to push the conversation farther.

"It wasn't because of his estates he came back. He believed in the justice of his cause. Whatever you say, you must at least admit that it was a heroic act to return to Hungary after the change of régime."

Törzs made an evasive gesture.

"It was idiotic. The heroes of the West are all idiots."

Baby suddenly felt the soul of a crusader in her breast.

"Don't you believe there are things worth dying for?"

An enigmatic smile puckered the man's lips.

"You can call me Imre, my pet, it won't upset me! Did you feel how soft this bed is? You certainly ought to have noticed it just now. Well, you see, Baby, it's creatures like you who take their ease now on the beds of heroes. No doubt, of course, you

might have preferred to lie on it with a Lieutenant in the S.S."

"I should feel extremely poor if you were my one and only memory," said Baby dryly. Then she went on:

"So, in your opinion, it's no longer worth the trouble of being a hero?"

"In Russia, yes. In the West, no."

"But those people they now call Westerners—at least *they've* something they believe in, something they defend . . ."

Törzs smiled ironically.

"Don't you realise they're just piling defeat on defeat? Suppose they make a discovery? Someone comes and steals the fruit of their long years of work. Suppose they defend a fortified line? They shut up a few hundred young men in cement casemates and put a gun in their hands. Those young men have got to hold the fort come what may: they defend themselves and straightaway become heroes. They say farewell to their lives, appreciate their noble role and count their cartridges. Their hearts swell with fine sentiments, they believe their death will achieve something and serve the interest of the West. Then the enemy captures them after bloody hand-to-hand fighting. The prisoners they drag off into captivity cover dozens of miles on foot, carrying their wounded. *That's* comradeship. They weep as they kiss the tattered bit of flag they hide in the depths of their pockets—that's patriotism . . . And when half their bodies are swelled up by vermin bites in the prison camps and their wounds begin to putrefy, the International Red Cross sends them bars of chocolate. Finally, they're repatriated. And then they discover that they've been betrayed from the very beginning . . . that the enemy knew the exact number of men and catridges and tins of meat and rolls of bandages. Everything had been calculated in advance by the enemy who had allowed them to play the part of supermen for a few weeks—or a few days. Don't you think that, when they've discovered all that, they become fundamentally defeatists? Besides, they soon become a nuisance, these men who parade their scars and their dead ideals in a community that no longer finds either of them particularly

moving. There's no better soil for our propaganda than a disillusioned hero. But, on the other hand, it *is* worth while to die as a Russian soldier—the Russian soldier knows that he is dying for world communism in a great defensive battle against the reactionary West. And Russian officers know that final victory will be theirs and that they will never have to appear in the dock before the indifferent tribunal of some foreign nation."

Baby listened attentively. She was seized with terror. She realised that the security she thought she had achieved was nothing but a myth. There was nothing in common between her universe and Törzs's universe.

"Why don't you say all this to someone who could argue with you," she exclaimed, getting up. Törzs readjusted his tie, using a piece of polished mahogany furniture as a looking-glass.

"You've never learnt anything, have you, Baby? So you've nothing to reply to me . . . Why don't you argue? Anyone who's read Marx at the age of five isn't embarrassed by any amount of argument when he's thirty."

"I'm a woman," said Baby, perfectly well aware that this retort was merely a shield behind which she hoped to hide her apprehension.

Törzs looked at his watch.

"It's getting late. Let's go."

Baby went up close to him and looked deep into the man's eyes with her own light ones.

"Are you pleased?" she asked softly.

Törzs brushed the offered lips with an absent-minded kiss.

"Of course. You shall have the furniture to-morrow."

Baby left the police headquarters with her knees shaking. She hurried across the street, without raising her eyes. She had the feeling that, by walking thus, not looking at anything but the paving stones ahead of her, she could make herself invisible. When she reached the corner of the street, she took a little mirror out of her handbag and pretended to remove a grain of dust from her eye. In reality, she wanted to take a glance, however fleeting, at her

own features. Could one read in them what had happened? But the little glass only showed her in turn one of her eyes or her almost bloodless lips or her nose or those two little wrinkles at the corner of her eyes that seemed to be incised with a knife, they were so fine and so deep. " No, it isn't age," she tried to explain to herself, " it's because I've laughed so much all my life."

She decided that, henceforth, she would limit her smiles and continued on her way. A little farther on, she tried to see herself in a shop window but her reflection became confused with the enormous red star prominently displayed at the back of the window. Baby felt utterly overwhelmed. Yet, at this moment, Party, politics and the whole of life under the new régime played only a minor part in her preoccupations. In any other place in the world, she would have walked with the same hesitant gait, trying to prevent her knees from knocking together; she would have run her hand over her skirt to brush off an invisible thread and to reassure herself that, outwardly at least, all was in order. The fact was that it was the first time in her life that she had really deceived her husband. In these twelve years she had been married to Janos, her imagination has wandered often enough and she had yielded her lips with as much abandon as if she had given her whole self. Nevertheless, she had never overstepped certain limits and Janos's heavy body was the only one that had imposed its law on hers.

At times she had been tempted to deceive her husband so as to deal a blow at the same time to the mother-in-law who had grafted herself on to their life as ruthlessly as mistletoe on an oak-tree.

And, now, she had just flouted two people at once: her husband and her mother-in-law. This achievement both satisfied her and slightly depressed her.

" I'm no longer an honest woman," she said to herself. As she was passing an Espresso bar at that moment, she decided that she simply must have a cup of coffee. It was not until she had her elbows on the cool marble of one of the little tables that she suddenly said to herself: " But what am I worrying about. I've nothing to fear any more. My lover is there to smooth out any

difficulties that might crop up . . ." All at once she felt so completely easy in her mind that she wanted to smile.

She went into the ladies' room and studied her face in the glass over the wash-basin. No, nothing betrayed what had happened: at the most, her pupils had grown a trifle smaller and her glance sharper, as if she were on the defensive. But her face, her hair, the hand that was arranging her curls—none of these had changed.

She returned to her table, ordered another coffee and meticulously lit a cigarette: it was the first time for years that she had not hurried. In her heart she would have been almost glad if she had been asked to produce her papers. She could hear herself treating the detective haughtily, answering disdainfully: "Comrade, if it's not enough for you that I am the wife of Janos Dorogi, orchestral conductor and director of the Lyric Theatre, go and get more information about me from Lieutenant Imre Törzs. Imre Törzs of the National Security . . ." But no one came to disturb her.

Her thoughts went back to her lover. "I'm going to transform him," she suddenly decided. "Why shouldn't he become a sincere, very pleasant friend? Fundamentally, he's not insensitive . . . he only hides his feelings under a veneer of Puritanism. It's essential to meet him on other ground." Then she tried to make her mind a blank, as one deliberately holds one's breath. Instead of thinking, she wanted to feel, to know how her senses reacted to this adventure. But her flesh was like a wireless antenna that had gone dead and no longer received any wave . . . it did not respond to any vibrations from without: the current had been cut off.

"Later on," said Baby, half aloud. "Later on . . ."

Before she crossed the hall of their house, Baby had already decided to have a new dress made.

She climbed slowly up the stairs, feeling as heavy as if she were dressed in garments of lead.

She turned the key very softly and managed to enter the hall noiselessly. From there, she went, still unheard, into the "little room." When she found herself among the piled-up rolls of

material, the depressing atmosphere of the loft at the police headquarters overwhelmed her once again.

Every moment, even her very breathing seemed to become a painful effort; she felt herself observed by a host of invisible eyes. "No, I don't want any of all this," she decided bitterly. Then, suddenly, like an awakening, she realised there was something she did want. Silk . . . she wanted silk. After the caress of unknown hands, she absolutely needed the softness of a delicate fabric.

"Are you in?" called out her mother-in-law, hearing her moving about the flat. Her voice was more raucous than usual.

"Yes," answered Baby, coming into the dining-room.

"Shall I make some coffee?"

A vague smell of cooking-fat trailed behind her.

"I don't want any," said Baby, going towards her own room. But the old woman barred her way.

"What about the furniture, dear?" she inquired with an anxious smile. "Did you find a good bed for me?"

"They'll bring it to-morrow. You'll have a bed and some arm-chairs. Janos will have a beautiful period desk."

The old woman's voice betrayed her agitation.

"And some carpets?"

"What's that you said?"

"Some carpets, my girl. Don't say you forgot to ask for some carpets! You know perfectly well that it's positively dangerous to walk on these parquet floors. I don't know how many times I've slipped and nearly fallen down."

"There aren't any carpets," said Baby coldly, mentally adding: "And it's on your bed that I've deceived you too."

The old woman scowled.

"You've managed things very badly. I'm going to tell Janos that you forgot to ask for any carpets. He'll see that we get some all right. We've been ruined by the war, but, of course, *you* don't bat an eyelid—*you've* got everything you need . . ."

Baby was no longer listening. She went into the bathroom and turned on the tap. Taking no further notice of her mother-in-

law's diatribes, she took a carefully preserved treasure out of her linen cupboard. It was a Paris fashion magazine, already slightly yellowed with age. Then she locked herself into the bathroom, undressed, and flicked through the pages of the magazine. Rows of little women, slim as wafers, smiled up from the smooth, glossy pages. A mannequin photographed on one of the quays of the Seine, leant on a long-handled umbrella; she wore a yellow silk dress with a big black flower poised on one of her thin, rather square shoulders.

"That's exactly what I want," thought Baby nostalgically. "But where shall I find some pure silk, a tailor and the money to have it made up?" She went on turning over the pages. On the last but one, a woman's profile was silhouetted against a midnight-blue background. There was a scarf round her neck that the wind floated out behind her. Baby gave a deep sigh and closed the fashion magazine. She plunged up to her chin in the warm water, shut her eyes and daydreamed. A gentle torpor slid over her: she thought of beautiful dresses, furs, jewels . . . But a sudden thought galvanised her: perhaps Paris fashions were no longer anything like that. How did one tie a scarf nowadays? If only she knew! . . . Above all, if only she had money—no matter where it came from . . . Promptly the figure of Törzs inserted itself into her daydreams. She began by trying to drive out the thought that sprang up in her mind: she ended by accepting it. She got out of her bath and dried herself without giving even one fleeting glance at her body. Perhaps she had never been so modest since she was twelve years old. . . .

20

MARTON RECEIVED a postcard by the morning post: on it a friend announced that his wife had just given birth to a son. The young man's face clouded over instead of brightening at this joyful news. He put the card down on the table as if it burned his fingers. He stared thoughtfully at the oblong piece of paper, then thrust it in his pocket and returned to his room. He flung himself full length on the bed, shaken with fear and despair. Never before had he felt such anguished apprehension. The harmless message had a hidden meaning: it warned Marton that he would shortly be arrested. It might be a question of days—or hours. He had a friend, a mysterious protector who had once promised him to warn him, if he could manage to do so, by just such a message.

Lying on his narrow bed, Marton stared at the ceiling. His imagination carried him away to distant and dreadful possibilities. Already he could feel the harsh glare of the arc-lamps scorching his eyes while unknown voices demanded him to admit something—but what?—something that would be sufficient to condemn him. "I'm going to faint," he thought. But, paradoxically, the realisation of his own weakness filled him with sudden energy. He leapt out of bed, rushed to his cupboard and feverishly packed his haversack. Yes, he would leave at once, no matter where he went. He would hide in the woods, crawl along the ditches. That way, he would get a good start of his pursuers. He would cross the frontier at the risk of being shot at. If they killed him, he didn't care—anything was better than being taken. His mother and Ida no longer counted: nothing counted but this animal fear that

was stronger than everything. Then he sat down on the bed again. Definitely, it would be better to wait till night. Yes, he would leave as soon as it was dark. Besides what an absurd idea to take a haversack which would give away the fact that he was escaping. Sheer madness! No, he would go off with his hands in his pockets, whistling carelessly. He would reach the next village on foot, take the train to the frontier, and there, with God's help, he would get through somehow. Who knew . . . By this time to-morrow he might already be in Austria? Or else. . . .

He went round behind the house and began to split logs for the kitchen fire. At midday he was nervous and could hardly bring himself to swallow anything. His mother chattered on without a break. She talked about Ida and about the neighbours; finally she said something about the goat that was giving so little milk.

About three, Ida came to see him. Marton could barely hide his nervousness.

"But whatever's the matter?" the girl asked him, laying her hand on his arm.

"Nothing," he said, almost shouting the word. It cost him a violent effort not to pull his arm away, the light touch was such agony to him. He was so apprehensive that every look, every question seemed intolerable.

Slowly, his fear changed to resentment. He had the feeling that everything and everyone around him had something to do with what had befallen him. What would his mother or Ida do in his place? They were eternally saying that they were ready to give their lives for him but did they have any real idea what it meant to be a hunted animal? He could feel invisible looks fastened on him, following every single movement he made. He could see himself, as if through the wrong end of a telescope, reduced to the dimensions of a terrified insect, darting widly hither and thither. As an officer, he had fought in the front line. But he had never imagined himself as a hero shedding his blood for his country with shouts of enthusiasm. He had gone off on a secret mission because

it was his duty, with mortal anxiety in his heart. He had executed the orders given him in a kind of trance, a mixture of unconsciousness and discipline. More than anything, he wanted to live, to *live* . . .

During the years he had been a prisoner, he had worked in the mines and felled trees. Utterly exhausted, he had dragged himself along on his knees, munching coarse grass to appease his hunger. He had survived. He had come back . . .

Marton looked at his watch. A quarter to four. The sky was transparent, as if it were spring. He was alone. Ida and his mother had left the house. Suddenly he felt an overwhelming longing for their presence. He wanted to implore them to help him to hide himself. Where had they gone? Why had they deserted him?

Five o'clock. Dusk was falling softly. Leaden grey clouds piled up on the eastern horizon. No, it was not a storm brewing; it was night coming on. Night . . . at last . . .

He put on a second shirt, a second pullover and his overcoat. He had just shut the cupboard door again when a motor car stopped in front of the house. Paralysed, he froze in his tracks. "Too late," he thought. His throat tightened. The garden gate creaked. With a dull thud, someone forced the front door. Perhaps they would not come as far as this? Marton was perfectly well aware that nothing he thought mattered now. Two men in leather jackets stood in the doorway of his room.

"State Police," announced one of them, introducing himself. "I advise you in your own interests not to rouse your neighbours."

Marton did not move.

"Forward march, my friend," said the detective, grabbing hold of him. He led him outside, pushing him by the arm. Never had the distance between the house and the garden gate seemed so short. Marton stopped on the pavement, as if he wanted to take root there. But the two men took him by the elbows. He fell on the back seat of the car as if he had dropped there from a height of several yards. One of the men took the steering-wheel; the other

seated himself beside Marton. The car started up. The driver switched on his headlights. The beam of light swept the deserted road. Over there in the distance, someone was approaching, limping. It was Ida, on her way back. She put up her hand to protect her eyes from the blinding glare, but walked on without stopping. Soon darkness swallowed her up.

21

THEY BROUGHT the furniture in a huge lorry. Tall emaciated, ill-shaven men unloaded them, then heaved them up again to carry them up to the flat; first the massive mahogany desk, then the arm-chairs and the bed for Janos's mother. These solemn, untidy men made a striking contrast to the impeccable young man who accompanied them. He watched them, never taking his hands out of his pockets, and greeted the family with no more than a curt nod.

"These are certainly not ordinary removers nor ordinary proceedings," thought Baby apprehensively. To her surprise, they also brought up two rolled-up carpets.

Her mother-in-law pointed to them triumphantly.

"There, you see! We've got some carpets all the same! Janos must have managed to get them somehow."

Baby shrugged her shoulders and looked at the bed. Her mother-in-law would sleep in the bed on which she had deceived Janos for the first time.

The silent men deposited the furniture in the middle of the drawing-room. Baby would have preferred them to put it in its proper place at once but she dared not make any demands.

While she was going from one piece of furniture to the other, she noticed that one of the men had spat on the parquet floor before he left.

She said nothing, so that it should be the mother who noticed the spittle and cleaned it up.

And that was exactly what happened.

When Janos returned about noon, he found the flat in complete chaos.

"What does all this mean?" he burst out. "Why isn't the furniture in its right place yet?"

"I didn't dare ask them to put it there."

His mother grumbled:

"Well, this is the first time I've seen *you* frightened of asking for something!"

All three of them set to work shifting everything round. Soon the sweat was running down Janos's forehead while his mother once more talked loudly of the risks of apoplexy. The great bed gave them any amount of trouble. They pushed the mother's divan out into the hall.

The mahogany desk found a place beside the piano. Janos opened the drawer cautiously as if he were afraid of finding something inside it. But the desk was completely empty.

The arm-chairs also caused them considerable trouble. Those high backs gave them the feeling that they were manœuvring rigid corpses.

"How perverse of you to have chosen Jenö's arm-chairs," Janos could not prevent himself saying.

Baby said sarcastically:

"Another time, go yourself. Besides, it wasn't I who chose the furniture. It was Törzs who suggested things or gave them . . . call it what you like."

Janos became uneasy.

"Better not discuss all that," he muttered. "Better not discuss it."

They unrolled the carpets. The dust that flew out of them danced in the sunbeams that filtered through the casement windows.

"Is this an oriental carpet?" asked the mother, bending down to feel the pile. The blood rushed to her head.

"Yes, it's an oriental carpet," said Janos, very low.

One of the carpets was larger than the largest room; they had to double it back on itself. The other exactly fitted Baby's room.

The flat was filled with a musty smell as if it had not been aired for weeks.

"Did you ring up and deliberately ask for the carpets?" inquired Baby.

"Of course. I explained that you'd forgotten them."

"And what did he say?"

"Who?"

"Törzs . . ."

"Nothing. What did you expect him to say?"

Baby was disturbed. She lit a cigarette.

"Oh . . . something about the theatre . . ."

Janos loosened his collar.

"It's probably a good sign that he didn't mention it. Presumably everything's going all right."

When Janos went off again to the Opera, Baby familiarised herself with the furniture. She wandered through the rooms and ended by sitting down on the edge of her own divan. With her eyes riveted on some invisible point, she thought about Törzs.

Two days had gone by since the moment when Törzs had taken possession of her and already the whole adventure seemed incredible. Hadn't she dreamt it all? No, there was no longer any doubt about it; she had only to look at the great bed to convince herself that it had really happened.

"Will there be a sequel?" she asked herself, suddenly seized with an intense desire to confide in someone. But she had never had a woman friend and she was cruelly aware of her isolation. Whether she wanted to or not, she was obliged to keep her secret. Her heart was swollen with all those words she would never utter; she felt a tenderness she had never experienced before beginning to germinate inside her.

Was it forty-eight hours or several years since Törzs had become her lover?

Baby spent the entire afternoon daydreaming in an opal-coloured haze of cigarette smoke.

About six o'clock, Klein made his appearance.

"Ah," he said, embarrassed in spite of his efforts to hide the fact, "I see the new furniture's here."

He avoided the new pieces with extreme discretion. It was in vain that Baby kept saying to him: "But do sit down, my dear Arpad," he dared not do so. He was terrified of making a mistake and sitting down on one of the new chairs. He stood leaning against the wall. He very nearly stood on one leg and he would have been happier still if he could have hovered in the air for the carpet scorched the soles of his feet. He knew where all this furniture came from. . . .

Baby noticed his uneasiness but did nothing to alleviate it. She watched him closely. Twilight was loosening her thoughts from their fetters and they were already crowding to her lips, but she said nothing. Yet she knew that one word from her would bring a rush of confidences from Klein. The singer had told her his troubles one day and this had flattered her. Quite frankly, in the presence of this newly-baptised man, she had felt crushingly superior. It was only afterwards that she noticed, not without a certain uneasiness, that she managed to be a Christian without letting this fact present the slightest problem to her. Klein's heart-rending utterances had echoed for a long time in her own mind; she had had a vague feeling that, on this subject, she lagged far behind him. It was as if, until that moment, she had neglected some possibility or some chance . . . as if she had come up against the utter emptiness of her life . . .

In the half-light, Klein's head jerked now and then in his little nervous tic. He would have liked to speak, but the more inwardly tormented he became, the more shame and shyness forced him to keep silent.

And yet, here, among the furniture of the man who had been hanged, in this twilight that tasted of dust, where time seemed to stand still and only objects were alive, he might have found the strength to tell all. Oh, why was it not possible to go backwards, to start all over again from the beginning and act quite differently? Would it not have been better to die in a German concentration

camp, faithful to his beliefs and free from remorse than to live on the borderline between two worlds? He did not want to be a Christian and yet he was one. He did not want to believe in baptism and yet he was sometimes transported by a wild joy at the thought that he had been given the right to share in a life overflowing with promises and hopes of eternity.

It was from very far away that he heard Baby's voice saying:

"To-morrow, I'll go and see the countess. I'll take her some nightdresses to change into . . ."

Her mother-in-law interrupted from the next room:

"You haven't enough for yourself."

After that, Klein knew that he would not speak; it was not only the furniture that was listening but Janos's mother too.

The next day, Baby did not go to the hospital because, early in the afternoon, Törzs appeared.

Her mother-in-law was all over him with effusive thanks from the moment he arrived.

"My dear Comrade Imre, you just can't imagine how grateful I am. At last I've got a good bed! I simply don't know how to thank you."

Törzs listened without a smile; he walked through into the dining-room. Baby was standing in the doorway of her room, trembling in every limb.

"Liberty, Comrade," he said to her, holding out his hand.

"Liberty, Comrade," Baby answered, avoiding the man's eye.

"My son is at the Opera," declared the old woman, fixing the two of them with her big, fishlike eyes.

"So he's not at home?" Törzs said, as if surprised.

The words rang false to all three of them.

"Did you come in the car, my dear Törzs?" inquired Baby. This aristocratic mode of address seemed to slap the police officer in the face.

"In the car," he answered brusquely.

"Will you take me as far as the theatre to meet my husband?"

"Why not?"

Baby went back into her room and put on a coat and scarf. She knotted the scarf at the side, under one ear, as she had seen it worn in the fashion magazine.

They took leave of Janos's mother and descended the stairs in silence.

"We're not going straight to the theatre," said Törzs, pressing the self-starter.

Baby said nothing. At moments, she turned slightly towards him and studied his profile. "My lover," she thought, mentally saying the word over and over again as if to get used to it.

They drove for a long time through the town. Baby had the impression that they were passing through the district where the school they had visited stood. At last Törzs turned into a small, silent street and stopped in front of a three-storied building.

"This is where I live," he said, opening the door of the car.

She entered the hall and began to climb the stairs. It was very cold.

"Second floor, on the right," said the police officer. Imre opened the door with his little key. Baby looked about her avidly. The narrow hall gave on to a large, very light room. The walls were covered with shelves loaded with books. Two grey blankets, meticulously folded, lay side by side on the narrow camp bed.

Törzs indicated another door.

"The bathroom's through there."

Baby took off her coat. She wished she could find something to say to relax the strain of the atmosphere.

She would have liked to say: "I've belonged to you, I'm going to belong to you to-day, why aren't you nicer to me? Say something, tell me something so that I can know you better. Isn't there anything in common between us after what has happened?"

"There's no hot water," Törzs warned her. "The whole street has undertaken to make voluntary economies. For a week, no one's using hot water."

Baby hid her distress under a smile. She went up to Törzs and

laid her hand softly on his shoulder. Then, looking up at him, she asked:

"Have you thought about me?"

Törzs drew her to him and kissed her on the mouth.

"Get undressed," he said. "We haven't much time."

Baby took off her clothes so hurriedly that her nails caught in her silk stockings.

"There'll be a ladder," she thought. Then she stopped in the doorway, naked and hesitant. Törzs was taking off his shoes.

"How narrow the bed is," thought Baby sadly. She was cold and did not know what to do.

"What are you waiting for? Come here," Törzs said. She could not make out whether this impatience came from ardour or merely from lack of time.

"I'm cold!" she said, later on. Törzs unfolded one of the blankets and put it over her.

"Ugh!" she wailed. "This horrible blanket scratches me! Why aren't there any sheets?"

"The sheets are in the cupboard," the man replied.

Baby got up and went over to the cupboard. Before opening it, she turned and looked at the man stretched out stark naked on the bed. Then, confused, she looked away again. She fumbled feverishly in the cupboard and found a sheet under a pile of shirts. She returned to the bed and arranged it as best she could.

She was about to go back to the bathroom again when Törzs spoke to her.

"Come and lie down by me a little while longer . . ."

She obeyed and waited. At last she decided to break the silence:

"At least let's talk about something . . ."

Törzs suddenly became affable, almost smiling.

"What can one talk about with you?"

Baby drew a little circle in the air, admiring her impeccably varnished nails as she did so.

"About everything," she said. "About the world . . ."

Törzs leant over her. This time he really was smiling.

"Go on . . . talk to me about the world."

Baby assumed the role of an expensive tart dealing with an ascetic whom she had subjugated.

"In the world I live in, all the women are exquisitely groomed and elegant. Their hair is beautifully done and they use delicious scent . . . They're constantly changing their clothes. They read a lot, too—only good literature of course. And they avoid worries because worries give them wrinkles . . ."

Baby suddenly broke off, for she had the feeling that Törzs was not seeing the joke. The young man's gravity froze her like a blast of icy wind.

"Of course I was only joking," she said, depressed. "I didn't mean it seriously . . ."

"Why won't you occupy yourself with something?" he asked. "Everyone ought to have a certain responsibility and at least a grain of self-criticism."

"But I'm married—it's my husband who supports me," retorted Baby—and the solid spectre of Janos seated itself on the corner of the bed. "He supports me," she repeated thoughtfully. The yellow silk dress cropped up in her mind again, but how could there be any question of *that* on this uncomfortable camp bed? She wondered what she could say that would meet with Törzs's approval. She would have liked to quote a passage of Gorki to him but she had never been able to read more than half a dozen pages of *Mother* and could not remember one word of them.

Everything had happened in a way that was totally unlike anything she had foreseen.

She had always imagined that, if ever she had a guilty affair, it would take place in languid luxury. The bed would be the height of comfort, the room well heated, the surroundings, sumptuous. Her gaze wandered over the actual room. The shelves that held the books were of unpainted deal; the cupboard door swung open of its own accord, as if dragged by its own weight. Near the window, stood a desk loaded with files. The sole decoration on the walls consisted of two pictures. Baby recognised one

of them, having seen it before in the office of the Lyric Theatre. It was Marx.

"Who's the other one?" she asked timidly.

"Miscurin," answered Törzs.

"Miscurin," repeated Baby in a small voice, taking refuge in the man's arms and almost in tears. She whispered tenderly in his ear:

"And now I've been yours for the second time. Do you love me?" But the moment she had said them, she would have done anything to have taken back those last words. She felt she had made a terrible blunder. She ought to have said something quite different . . .

Törzs lit a cigarette.

"You know, better than anyone, that you're beautiful," he said.

Baby hurried into the bathroom. She banged the tap furiously with her nervous little fist. She detested cold water.

22

This was the first time that Baby had deceived her husband. And already she was beginning to take it as a matter of course. She could never have believed it would be so easy to put someone off the trail and that nothing in her own body would give away her treachery. When Törzs's name was mentioned, she remained completely indifferent. Ought not this exaggerated detachment have been enough in itself to arouse suspicion?

"Whatever gave him the idea of bringing you to the Opera?" Janos asked at supper, after they had returned home together.

"I couldn't say. Personally, I was glad to go in a car instead of having to walk."

"Törzs arrived at half past three," said her mother-in-law.

Janos was extremely annoyed.

"It was quarter-to-six when you turned up at the Opera. How on earth did the drive take so long?"

Baby's calm remained unruffled.

"We stopped to have some coffee in Kossuth Lajos Street and we sat talking." In her mind's eye she could see Törzs's naked body stretched out on the camp bed but she took care not to smile. "We chatted over our coffee," she repeated.

His mother looked at Janos. She hoped something would happen. But he was pale and he pushed the discussion no further. He was too frightened of learning painful facts that would force him to intervene and assert himself. It was as if he were hiding under water and holding his breath so that there should be no bubbles on the surface to give him away.

Baby, thoroughly sure of herself, enlarged the circle of bread-crumbs she was making round her glass.

"We had a long chat," she said, with almost provocative self-confidence.

Janos wiped his chin.

"These conversations with him are unnecessary. You might end by dropping a brick."

"Why should I drop a brick? I've nothing on my mind except things I can talk about without being afraid . . ."

Janos became impatient.

"I've had enough of your twaddle, Baby. What are you going to answer him if he asks you if you still think about your cousin who was hanged? How would you answer that, eh?"

Baby swallowed her saliva. They could hear the buzzing of a fly's wings. The young woman split a crumb into two with her long, slender thumbnail. Then she said slowly:

"What about you? What are *you* going to say if he asks you why you went all out to try and get yourself made Director of the Opera under the Nazi régime?"

Janos got up so abruptly that he overturned his glass.

"I didn't want to be made Director. It was you two who pushed me into it. It was you two who egged me on to raise the subject with Jenö. You've been digging my grave ever since that day——"

"*Me* . . . your grave!" moaned his mother. Pointing her finger at her daughter-in-law, she shrieked:

"She's the one who's been digging your grave from the moment you got married!"

Baby's temples began to throb violently.

"Suppose they know you went to see Jenö . . ."

"But I didn't go to see him. You know I didn't go. I left the house meaning to, yes. But I turned back half-way because, on the way, I changed my mind. I saw farther than you two . . ."

"But just suppose you had gone there and that Jenö had put

something in writing about the subject of your visit and the refusal of your application . . . What would you do *then*?"

Janos was shaking all over; his face was crimson.

"Don't speak only for me. You'd better say, what should *we* do then? You're an accomplice and every bit as responsible as I am."

At that, Baby, too, got up from her chair.

"I've never been responsible for anything whatsoever and I never will be. I'm an irresponsible creature—you've certainly dinned it into me often enough!"

Having said it, she left the room, well aware that the atmosphere was tense to breaking point.

Janos was so gnawed by anxiety that he paced round and round the room in despair. Finally he went and knocked at Baby's door and sat down by her bed. He was wearing a dressing-gown. His mood was utterly humble. Baby, half asleep, could hardly keep her eyes open. Janos questioned her anxiously: his lips were white.

"What makes you think Jenö kept a diary?"

Baby shook her head.

"I don't know anything about it—he never mentioned it to me. But it's quite possible he did. He was a very meticulous man and only lived for his work. It's quite probable he left some note about you."

They looked at each other. She would have liked to take pity on Janos, to feel sorry for him. But she was quite unable to do so.

"Let's go to sleep," she said. She wanted to be alone.

Janos returned to his room and went to bed. Ever since a lamp had been left on in all three rooms, they had all slept badly. The light filtered through their closed eyelids, but, if they switched it off, it was still worse because Jenö returned to haunt them again. It was Baby's room he haunted most, sitting on one of the high-backed chairs. He drummed lightly and rhythmically on its arms with his white fingers. He stared at Baby, and after he had stared

at her for some time, his eyes became phosphorescent and his fingers grew longer and longer until they touched her. Then she woke up with a start, groped in the darkness to switch on her bedside lamp, upset her glass of water and then glanced about her with wild, frightened eyes. At the moment, the arm-chair was empty again. With a deep sigh, Baby let herself fall back on the rumpled bed again and pulled the blankets over her head. But the light came through them and she needed air. Her torment did not end until dawn showed pallidly in the sky outside.

Janos suffered in a different way. He lay in his bed, not daring to move in case he knocked against two rigid feet that dangled from the ceiling. This forced immobility made the sweat run down his forehead. He tried to tell himself that a grown-up man is not afraid of ghosts. And then he would begin to lose his nerve again, to ask himself: "Did Jenö keep a diary?"

The great bed creaked at intervals under the weight of the old woman. The creaking could not be remedied because no one knew where it came from. Sometimes the bed creaked when she suddenly drew up her legs in an excess of nervous tension. Sometimes she had only to turn her head very gently. The old woman became irritable; she felt a real hatred for that noise. She could not go back to sleep again because she kept listening for it. Every time she switched on her lamp, it stopped, so she could never pin it down to any particular spot.

The days drifted by. It grew colder and colder.

Baby met Törzs two or three times a week. She was always at home so that he could find her at any hour. She went off with him, submissive and almost gay. They talked a little more nowadays. Baby told him about her childhood and her unfulfilled dreams. The man would listen, say a few words to keep the conversation going, then Baby would go on talking.

At home, Janos was making the final corrections to the *Symphony of Joy*. As soon as he returned from the Opera, he would fling himself down on the piano stool and play the score as if it were his one means of escape and freedom.

They hardly ever saw any of their former friends. Janos was at the theatre from morning to night. Baby remained at home, waiting for Törzs. Only the mother kept up with acquaintances and even made new ones. She had only to go out on to the landing to find someone in whom to confide. On the floor below, there was an old couple who lived on a modest pension. They had only been allowed to keep one room in their flat; the rest had had to be given up to the factory workers. In the early days, the mother used to go and borrow kitchen utensils from them.

"We lost everything during the siege," she would say.

Janos forbade these visits.

"We must only have contacts among workers, Mamma," he said.

After that the conversations were restricted to a few exchanges of views on the landing. These did not last long for, each time, the concierge stuck his head out of his lodge to spy on what they were saying. . . .

23

"WHAT IS the solution?" demanded Baby.

It was a quarter-to-one in the morning and they were shivering, still sitting round the table with an ash-tray full of cigarette stubs in front of them.

"Life is very difficult," Baby went on. Then she said again: "What possible solution could there be? War?"

"There won't be a war," answered Janos, clutching his dressing-gown round his neck.

The bed creaked under his mother's weight. She called out from the other room:

"Don't talk of war! It stops me from sleeping."

"Be quiet, Mamma," growled the conductor.

Baby lit a fresh cigarette, although her mouth was already as bitter as if she had drunk gall.

"We ought to have fled to the West in '45. It was still possible then."

Janos gave an evasive shrug.

"That would only have been a temporary solution. They'd have followed us. One day or another, they'll invade Europe. One's just got to dig in—dig in. Yet I'm really on their side. I want to collaborate with the new régime. If I succeed in going to Moscow, my career's made. But, first and foremost, I've got to win the Prize of Liberty with my symphony. The rest will come of its own."

His own words restored his courage. He felt suddenly extremely confident.

" My little silly of a Baby, you'll come and clap me in Moscow, won't you? Are you pleased? "

Baby burst into tears. Her face was convulsed; her whole body shook with sobs. She would have liked to lay her face on the stained tablecloth and admit everything. Let both of them—his mother too—know what had happened to her . . . She wanted to go down on her knees and confess everything, humbly, with the salt taste of tears in her mouth. After all, they were part of her life, they were her family. Twelve years of living side by side welded them together and, a very long time ago, they had loved each other . . . She waited for Janos to stand up and take her in his arms. But his mother's voice brought her back to reality.

" Why is she crying? Why are you upsetting my nerves in the middle of the night? "

Janos leant over his wife.

" If you want to send me to my death . . . then go on, make scenes like this. It's the only thing you've spared me up to now —hysteria. What are you crying about? "

Baby dried her tears.

" I'd always hoped for Paris—Paris and not Moscow . . . You've always promised to take me to Paris but you've never got any further than wonderful promises. You might have just as much success in Paris! "

Janos's whisper became almost shrill.

" The West's only good for thrusting us back again. Haven't you grasped that yet? Their radios have been repeating the same old phrases for years; only the speakers change. They treat Hungary as an imbecile with eight million heads that you can go on dinning the same ineptitudes into without fear of being answered back."

The mother appeared in the doorway. There were coffee stains down the front of her nightdress. She was wringing her hands.

" You two want to go off somewhere without me! You want to abandon me—me, your own mother——"

" You're not my mother, only my mother-in-law. There's a

difference," retorted Baby. " And if our married life has got to the point it has, it's because of you. You're always on our heels, listening to every word we say—spying on every single movement."

The old woman took no notice of anything but the beginning of this diatribe.

" And where *has* your married life got to? " she asked furiously.

The blood rushed to Baby's head.

" To the point where I've . . ."

Janos interrupted her.

" Leave Mamma alone. Be quiet and go to bed."

Then he went up to the old woman, put his arms round her and led her back to bed.

" Don't be childish, Mamma," he said affectionately. " You know very well you're the one I love best in the world. In 1945, I could have left the country. It was because of you that I stayed."

The old woman bristled.

" It's not true you stayed because of me. You never wanted to go. I'm not going to allow myself to be made the scapegoat. *I'm* not responsible for anything! "

Janos stood there helplessly, his arms dangling. Then his mother softened. Gently she stroked his greying head and, with her thumb, she traced a little cross on the perspiring forehead.

24

The next day Baby decided to visit the countess and take her some nightdresses. Tired and irritable, she carried her parcel with the bored expression people wear when they have to be amiable to strangers. By luck, she found a seat in the tram and could observe the silent passengers in their shabby clothes at her leisure. Her smoked glasses gave an even gloomier tint to the rainy November sky. The passengers became more and more numerous for the tram ran through the entire city. The countess was a patient at the hospital where Dr. Kelemen was in charge of the neuropathic clinic.

Baby walked by the porter's lodge with the easy assurance known only to people who are perfectly well. An old woman passed her; her head was swathed in bandages. Baby looked away in disgust. "What can there be under the dressing?" she wondered, with a spasm of nausea. She wandered from building to building without daring to ask her way: they might have thought—to her shame—that she was looking for the venereal diseases section on her own account. When she arrived at the central building, she decided to go and ask Dr. Kelemen for directions.

The doctor received her warmly:

"Good morning, my very dear lady," he said, bowing as low as if he were raising the gloved hand he was about to kiss from the very ground.

"Pray be seated. I've just finished my morning round of visits. You surely won't refuse a cup of coffee?"

As if hypnotised, Baby sat down opposite the desk. It was only

now, in this overheated room, that the chill dampness of this autumn day made her shiver. How many things had happened since her last interview with the doctor! The bluish flame of the spirit lamp fluttered. The doctor lit a cigarette and rested his elbows on the desk.

"I saw *Il Seraglio*," he said. "It was an excellent production. I was really enchanted by it."

Baby's thoughts were so far from the Opera and from her husband that she had difficulty in grasping what he was talking about. She was perfectly aware that she ought to make some appropriate remark but could find none. She went on smoking in silence. Kelemen contemplated his cuff-link with sustained attention. Inwardly, he was smiling indulgently. Baby had not come, as she pretended, just to look in on him as she was passing; she represented one more "case" in his day.

"Has something gone wrong again, dear lady?" he asked, with a slight frown. The word "again" was said without the lightest impatient stress; it implied that he recalled everything he already knew about Baby's state of mind.

"I went to the country," she replied in a monotonous voice. He wondered whether those words summed up all she had to say or whether they were merely the prelude to a tedious recital that would take her an hour.

"Well, then, are you cured? Do you feel calmer in yourself?"

"And now I'm back, I'm deceiving my husband," she declared, speaking very fast as if she were stating a project, not an actual fact. Then she was silent, waiting alertly.

Kelemen shuddered. This confession touched him on the raw. Something turned false between himself and the young woman. The atmosphere had suddenly taken on an unhealthy intimacy. This was something of which Kelemen had a horror. He was so much in the habit of taking the initiative with his psychotic patients that a direct and unforeseen remark from a sane person unhinged him.

He puffed nervously at his cigarette but the little silver holder

had just got blocked up and all he inhaled was the bitter taste of warm nicotine. Kelemen would have liked to blot out the little sentence Baby had just uttered. He had a profound contempt for women who were driven by some indecent impulse to make such avowals to him and who, in tearing the veil from their own crime, betrayed their accomplice.

"I rely on your professional discretion," Baby added still in a low, rapid voice. But she felt the words were superfluous. The coffee was ready. Kelemen filled the two small cups but forgot to offer the young woman any sugar. She dared not ask for any.

"Discretion is something entirely relative, Madame. I am not at all inclined to believe in discretion. It needs great strength of mind to keep a secret. I admit that your confession has somewhat disturbed me. I don't understand how I have deserved your confidence!"

"I've no one else to talk to," said Baby, aware that, for the first time for many years, she was blushing. She was treading on unknown ground. Instead of being able to find words to liberate herself, she had mentally come up against a brick wall. She would have liked to escape, to regard this whole scene as a bad dream. But she was a prisoner within these four walls, holding a coffee-cup in her hand. By the time he had unblocked his cigarette holder, the doctor had recovered his composure.

"I have no principles," he said at last. "Don't think for a moment that your declaration has surprised me on account of any moral considerations. I am only thinking that this situation may become extremely unpleasant. To me, a woman who deceives her husband is always something of a patient suffering from schizophrenia. She has two lives and suffers equally in both of them."

Baby dared not tell him that it was only at this very moment that her situation had begun to seem painful to her; here, in this comfortable arm-chair, with a cup of coffee in her hand. She drank a small mouthful, laid the cup down on the desk and stood up. Her face was burning and it embarrassed her that the doctor should witness her distress.

" Good-bye, Doctor," she said, holding out her hand as hesitantly as if she were afraid he were going to hit her.

" Good-bye, Madame," he returned, with a polite but expressionless smile.

Baby left the clinic with her cheeks still on fire. Her shame gradually turned to anger. " It's probably true," she told herself, " that Kelemen has no use for women. . . ."

But, sitting in the tram that was carrying her back to town, it was no help to her to impute every kind of perversion to the doctor. She grew so unhappy that the tears welled up and overflowed. She turned her head away and pretended to look out of the window to hide the fact that she was drying her eyes. As she walked in the cold rain that beat down on the streets, she realised that she had just lost a discreet friendship and that nothing remained in its place but the goodwill of a cultured doctor with a passion for music. The little blue flame under the glass globe would never burn for her again. And all because of one pointless remark. . . .

When she arrived at the entrance to their house, she nearly burst into sobs. She opened her handbag to take out her handkerchief. It was not till that moment that she noticed she was still dangling a small parcel from her left hand: the nightdresses she intended for the countess. The whole purpose, in fact, of her expedition.

25

EVER SINCE her visit to Kelemen, the world had changed for Baby. The somewhat exotic adventure in which she had figured as heroine, beginning with the scene in the loft, had lost its strangeness and gradually taken on the very definite character of a liaison. She went on visiting Törzs in secret and being charming to him; she even paid him the homage of sentimental tears that at first surprised even herself. When the painful memory of the hospital had faded, she began to love the police officer with real passion. In Törzs she embraced her own security: she gave herself to him as if each act of love-making prolonged her life. All around her, a world was falling into ruins: a world to which she herself belonged. A thousand signs reminded her of it every day. Recently, she had met one of her own friends who was now working in an iron-works and who had been waiting for years for the return of her husband who was a prisoner in Russia. After three or four minutes conversation with this pitiful woman with her drab hair and her broken nails, she had been seized with panic and fled. She had not mentioned this meeting at home for fear her mother-in-law would fling at her the eternal: "There, you see, my girl!" She realised that the new era that had followed the siege of Budapest was now something solid and fully established. Everything that occurred appeared perfectly normal to the new generation who no longer even suffered from the changes. It was only for the "old lot" that life was a painful problem. And she also counted among the "old lot" the "has-beens" . . . Being the mistress of the austere, fanatical police officer gave her a sense of security. Her

lover's comfortless bachelor room represented for her the antechamber of the new era that she had the right to enter, a place where she could find support and perhaps even a little love. During the day, she no longer gave a thought to Jenö. At night, when she imagined his ghost lying in wait behind the velvet curtain, she explained to him that she could not behave otherwise and tremulously asked him to forgive her.

When there were purges in the bosom of the Party, she trembled for Törzs. If he were to be liquidated, she would be wrecked too.

As she was quite convinced that, without her, there would never have been a Lyric Theatre under Janos's direction, Baby tended to treat the singers rather haughtily. Without being rude to them, she sometimes treated them during rehearsals with all the condescension of a rich patroness.

One day, she begged the police officer to give her a key to his flat.

"Then I could go there whenever I wanted to—if you weren't there, I'd sit there as good as gold and read till you came back."

Törzs's reply had been evasive.

"I'll have a second key cut and give it to you," he had said. But the days went by and Baby never received the key. She renewed the request but was equally unsuccessful.

The question of the new dress was never raised. The yellow silk material often haunted her imagination but, whenever it did, a miniature picture of Jenö hanging from his gallows superimposed itself on it like a pattern printed on the fabric.

Janos no longer scolded her when she spent money recklessly. Baby bought a whole battery of lipsticks, creams and make-up. Lately she had taken to using a greenish eye-shadow shot with silver, on her lids.

This gave her eyes a mysterious, far-away glimmer as if they were reflected in water. Her sleepless nights had made her thinner than ever: she was as slim as she had been at eighteen. She had grown really lovely. Every one of her movements made her intensely aware of her body's perfection.

Janos was able to breathe more freely. He informed his family that they had granted him extra time for his *Symphony of Joy*. It was not to be presented to the public until the 22nd of December, just before Christmas.

At the word Christmas, Baby raised her eyebrows.

"I presume you're talking about the Feast of Fir-trees. Your vocabulary is shockingly out-of-date. Anyone who toes the Party Line as conscientiously as you do, ought to watch his language. What a bourgeois, Western expression, that word Christmas! A word reeking with nostalgia and regret for the past . . ."

The mother gave her son a frightened glance.

"You let her jeer at you like that?"

"Baby was only joking," he said, with a forced smile. "I know she was only joking."

All intimacy between them had long ago ceased. One day when Janos's hand had slipped down the front of Baby's dress, groping for her breast, she had angrily pushed it away.

"Idiot," she had said, slowly and emphatically. "Can't you see that it's all over between us, that it simply doesn't exist any more? You might at least spare me the humiliation . . ."

And Janos had not replied: "You little baggage, I shall smack you." He had remained silent, though a little vein in his neck had throbbed as if it would burst.

His mother must have been listening, for she had asked him anxiously when he reappeared in the doorway:

"What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

But, instead of blaming the old woman for her indiscretion, he had stood rooted to the spot, his eyes hard with anger and hatred, and muttered, as if to himself:

"Everything's wrong . . ."

26

One morning, Budapest woke up with a violent start, like a sleeper roused by a whip-lash. In several parts of the town, huge lorries had stopped in front of blocks of flats, and concierges in slippers, with a garment hastily flung over their night attire, were feverishly opening the doors. Police officers, some in uniform, others in mufti, poured into the entrance halls, dashed up the stairs and rang the bells of certain flats. They kept their fingers on the bell-push until somebody came and opened the door. They were confronted by frightened citizens, paralysed with terror; old men; retired civil servants; women on the verge of collapse. The police officers handed them a blue ticket; the deportation notice. They gave them one hour in which to pack their belongings; the luggage they were allowed to take was reduced to a bare minimum. The police officers looked at these mortally stricken creatures with complete indifference and did not reply to their agonised questions: "Where are they taking us? And why?"

Objects kept falling out of their trembling hands: the outlines of their rooms grew blurred before eyes that dimmed with tears and anguish. At the moment of setting out for an unknown destination, who could say what things were "the most necessary?" They put on their warmest clothes, tore the blankets from beds that still retained the heat of their bodies and tottered downstairs, clutching each other, sobbing and imploring mercy. In the flats where no bell had pealed insistently, people gathered together near the entrance, taking part in the drama that was going on but not daring even to glance outside their front door.

In the street, the lorries were engulfing the lost souls. The tarpaulins were pulled down, the roar of the engines drowned the sobs and the lorries drove away.

Where had they gone? That was the question that the whole terror-sticken town asked itself next day. That was the one question on every lip: "Where have they gone?"

Not only the next day, and the next, but all during the following weeks, the infernal game continued. The lorry stopping outside the house, the ring at the door-bell, the blue ticket, the fevered packing, and then . . . a blank void. The city could no longer sleep.

Sometimes no one came to answer the fatal ring. Then the police forced open the door or the windows. In the kitchen they stumbled over the bodies of the suicides, lying open-mouthed under the tap from which the escaping gas still hissed. . . .

Some time later, there was news at last of the people who had been deported. They had either been crowded into concentration camps or farmed out among the peasants to work on the land. The latter had to live in barns or in mud-floored rooms with no form of heating.

All the same, a sigh of relief went up on all sides. "At least, they haven't taken them to Russia . . ." But soon afterwards, a wave of terror once more submerged people's minds. What did the State intend to do with those who had been deported? Might not all this be merely the prelude to deporting them to Siberia?

"It's nothing more than a defensive move on the part of the State," Törzs explained to Baby. "The peasants who are pouring in from the country to become industrial workers need living accommodation. People who have retired on pensions or who have no jobs are the ones who propagate their defeatist ideas. They are destined for deportation because they constitute dangerous elements. They disturb the atmosphere of a city in full process of reconstruction and development. We've got to make room for the new generation, for active constructive communists who are building up communism with real fervour."

"By exterminating thousands and thousands of individuals?" Baby had asked, her lips white.

"You use the wrong expression . . . All we are doing is to eliminate them to make room for the men of to-morrow. Besides, the deported persons will have the chance to work, too. They will be able to earn the minimum living wage so that they need not starve. They will build roads so that our own people will be able to move about more freely. They will be harnessed to agricultural work so that more and more of the peasant masses will be able to flow into the cities. They will learn silence and obedience."

"They'll die like flies," Baby insisted, unshaken.

"There's no revolution without its victims. And without revolution, there can be no new world. Don't you imagine that the peoples of the European countries still groaning under the yoke of capitalism aren't impatiently waiting for *their* revolution? It's only under a hypocritical régime one can gain time by fine speeches. The real solution is ours: the lorry and the cattle truck."

In the house where Baby lived, they had deported the retired couple with whom her mother-in-law used to enjoy a gossip. The old woman was in despair about it.

"Poor things," she had said compassionately. But she had hastily added: "They always used to lend me their sieve . . . wherever shall I get one now?"

One evening, Arpad Klein came to see them; his eyes red with weeping. Janos was rehearsing his *Symphony of Joy;* his mother was in the kitchen, cooking. Arpad collapsed at Baby's feet. Squatting on the carpet, he muttered:

"They've deported Agi. It happened a week ago. To-day she's at last sent me some sign of life. She's in a village. It's so cold in her room that the water freezes in the jug."

"Why have they deported her?" Baby trembled as she asked the question.

"As you remember, Agi was dismissed from the Troika several months ago and declared a social parasite. They've deported her because she couldn't say how she earned her living. They classified

her among the dubious elements—they also brought it against her that she sang too many Western songs. She sometimes used to meet an Englishman in the Troika days. Sothey declared that she worked for the capitalists and they suspected her of spying. What can I do? What can I do? How can I get her back to town?"

"I thought they wouldn't touch the Jews any more," said Baby gently. "They'd already suffered so much under the German occupation."

"Agi wasn't deported because she was a Jewess. There's no question of racial prejudice. In this matter, everyone comes under the same terrible heading of equality."

"What about yourself? Wouldn't you be willing to expatriate yourself and go to Israel?"

Klein shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you suppose I'd do out there? A wretched creature like me who's had himself baptised . . . Besides, even if I wanted to go there, they wouldn't let me leave the country . . ." He leant forward till he was so close to Baby that his elbows almost rested on her knees and asked:

"What do you think of eternity?"

Baby realised that Klein was once again going to brood and analyse and torture himself in the old, familiar way. She said to him gently:

"My dear man, I must admit I've never thought about it at all. Why don't you go and see a Catholic priest who'd explain all these things to you?"

Arpad hesitated.

"It would be no good my listening to any of them. I should always think they were deceiving me so as to win me over to a cause that, in my own mind, I keep fighting against. If I happen to ask a question, it's just because the opportunity happens to occur. After all, Christianity must surely have some image that symbolises eternity?"

Baby felt utterly helpless.

"I haven't had a catechism in my hands since I was in the Junior School."

"But you surely have some personal idea about it, haven't you? Look, I've made one for myself. To me, eternity is that infinite time when the same question keeps being repeated over and over again in my ear—a question I shall never be capable of answering by my own powers."

Baby leant towards him.

"What is this question?" she asked softly.

"Simply this. Is there any way of being a real Christian?"

Baby said nothing for a moment. Then she sighed:

"How difficult it is to understand a Jew."

"You don't need to understand Jews, you need to love them." Then he added hastily, as if apologising for himself: "At least, the ones who deserve it."

27

Ida's life had become nothing but an agonising nightmare: a nightmare from which there was no hope of awakening, since everything was hideously true: Marton's arrest, the approach of winter, the child she was going to bear. Pale and drawn, she wandered about the newly repainted house like a ghost. Her lips were set in a bitter line and seemed to be always repressing an inward cry of distress. Now that she had grown heavier, she limped worse than ever. Nevertheless she often left the house and only returned late in the evening, her cheeks white and pinched from the cold. She avoided her parents as much as she could; their pity hurt her. She preferred the company of strangers; with them, at least, she could be natural and not have to act a part. She craved for physical exertion. Often she would climb the steep hill as fast as possible, stand panting for a moment or two in the little, now leafless wood, then stride down again with hurried, stumbling steps. The countryside, silver with the first white frosts, and the great lead-coloured lake witnessed her suffering with stony unconcern.

One night she woke up in a fever; her heart was throbbing as if it would burst and the sweat ran down her forehead. She bore her discomfort patiently and prayed. But the dawn that found her wide-eyed and exhausted did not bring her the solution she hoped for. In her heart, she did not understand what was happening to her. Ever since Marton had taken her in his arms that first time, she had had only one wish; to have a child by the man she loved so much.

But, now that her dearest desire had been fulfilled, there was no Marton. A neighbour had seen him disappear in company with two men in leather jackets. That was all that was known about him. He had been arrested. Ida felt as if she were standing on the edge of a bottomless gulf that had swallowed up her lover. Where could she search for him? She had gone to the Secretary of the Party; he had shrugged his shoulders and pretended to know nothing. Feverishly she had searched her own memories. Marton had never alluded to anything that might have compromised him. The young mother was half crazy with despair. She had hunted in vain through all her son's belongings; there had been no letter, not the slightest indication. His clothes, strewn about the empty room, were as impersonal as if he had never worn them.

Ida's faith in herself and in the world about her had suddenly crumbled. Up to her fiancé's disappearance, she had believed that, in spite of her slight infirmity, she would be able to build her modest happiness independently alike of the past and of the difficult present. She had often told herself that, but for Marton's captivity and the post-war social upheaval, they would never have come together. Deeply moved by this thought, she had kissed the young man's swollen hands because this mysterious disease had been her ally, bringing her crippled self closer to the boy she loved.

And now, she no longer even believed in her own love. For now that Marton was gone, now that she could no longer prove to him, with a triumphant smile, that one could produce new life, even with a crooked hip, she no longer wanted this child. From an ardently hoped-for symbol of love, it had become a menacing reality. She wanted to tear this insistent life out of her womb, not to have to endure the consequences that terrified her. She dared not speak of it to her parents. How could she bear to see the vision that would pass through their minds and be reflected on their faces —the vision of their daughter in the arms of her lover . . .? Obviously she might have told Marton's mother, but could one speak of such things to a weeping ghost? And had not his mother

been jealous of every moment her son had stolen from her to spend with Ida? It was two months now since Marton had vanished and all her running wild in the wind and rain had been useless. Every day that passed brought home the fantastic fact more clearly; she was going to have a child and that child would be born without a father.

"And yet I love it," she kept telling herself obstinately. But, in her heart of hearts, she knew that she would give up anything, even the memory of her love affair, if only she could be delivered of this nightmare. She could already see herself, crippled and weighed down by her swollen belly, alone in a hostile world.

"I don't want it; no, no, I don't want it," she moaned. And she no longer even had the strength to weep.

Her father's presence was particularly painful to her these days. He, on the other hand, kept following her about as if he must be there to drag her back at the last moment from the brink of suicide. Sometimes he surprised her in the course of her gruelling walks. When he did, Ida was almost rude to him.

"Why do you follow me about?" she would say impatiently. "What's the good? Why can't you let me sort things out by myself?"

He never answered but walked beside her till they reached the house. Even when she was in her room, Ida was often quite sure that her father was spying on her through the keyhole, holding his breath. Once she had very quietly slipped over to that door and opened it suddenly. Sandor was standing just outside, a trifle embarrassed, but ready with an excuse like a thief caught red-handed.

"I was going to knock on your door but there was no sound in your room, so I thought you were asleep. I won't stay, child, I don't want to disturb you."

Ida would have liked to control this excessive irritability of hers. As soon as her father was not there, she would decide to be sweet to him; to be patient and affectionate the next time she saw him.

But he had only to look at her with those anxious eyes for Ida to be ready to scream with exasperation.

" You can have complete confidence in me," he had said to her one day. Then he had waited hopefully for her to tell him her secret.

" I haven't anything to tell you," she had replied, laying her hand on his arm to soften the curtness of her answer. But when he had taken the little hand and pressed an almost humble kiss on it, she had flushed with anger.

" A father oughtn't to kiss his daughter's hand," she had said brusquely, and left the room.

For a long while after she had felt her father's kiss burning her wrist. Mentally, she had thrust away that head where the last remaining hairs now formed only a silvery crown, yet she would have liked to go down on her knees in front of that beloved father and implore him to forgive her. She would have liked to explain her strange behaviour, to tell him that, at the moment, she could not endure the presence of anyone at all. But these good intentions never went as far as acts: the moment Ida saw her father, her one idea was to escape . . .

After dinner, during the long November evenings, the notary and his wife sat by the stove. He smoked in silence while Anna knitted. The atmosphere was heavy with all their unspoken words. They forced themselves to keep up this silence and deliberately sought each other's company to convince each other of an indifference which both were far from feeling. At intervals, Anna would give a little nervous cough, not only to remind him that she was there and very much alive but to make her silence all the more significant. What the notary found intolerable was when she would take to humming incessantly under her breath. He wanted to stop his ears so as not to hear that exasperating sound.

One night, he broke silence and spoke to his wife.

" Have you still a confidence to make to Ida? Fate has got tired of your threats. It has made Marton vanish to Siberia or into the

depths of a dungeon. Your words have been stifled in your throat, Anna . . ."

She went on humming without answering, but her needles clicked a little faster. She knitted feverishly.

"Have you read Theresa's letter?" she asked, a little later.

"No."

"It's in my room, on the table."

The man did not answer. He sat on where he was, imperturbably.

Anna laid down her work.

"What's happening to Theresa apparently doesn't interest you in the slightest. It's weeks now that she's been in a Youth Camp. They're stuffing her head with propaganda. But you couldn't care less."

The notary answered, almost absentmindedly:

"Propaganda . . . At this moment, you're taking a risk when you use that word . . . One of these days, perhaps you'll realise that everything isn't running on the old well-worn tracks in this country . . ."

Instead of counter-attacking, his wife suddenly put herself on the defensive. She asked, with alarm:

"Do you think the house is in danger too?"

"Ida is in danger," he replied. "She is dying of anxiety . . . She is in despair . . ."

"She won't be the first woman who's survived a broken heart," Anna said, very low. "Besides, Marton may come back. They're sure to release him when they find he's done nothing."

The notary relit the cigarette that had gone out in his mouth.

"What do you know about him? Nothing. Besides, it's entirely irrelevant whether he's been mixed up in something or not. He comes in the category of undesirable persons—those who ought to disappear."

"Ida will get over it all right," Anna repeated obstinately. "Now that she's envisaged the boy's probable fate, Marton has become as unreal as some legendary character. His sudden dis-

appearance seems just as fabulous as his sudden return from captivity."

After a moment, Anna went on:

"All the same, you ought to read Theresa's letter. I've no idea where she is. Her address is exactly like a military address."

"All right, I'll read the letter," said the notary, yawning. "Remember to give it me some time."

28

On the 22nd of December, the very day of the first performance of the *Symphony of Joy*, a terrifying piece of news swept the town. The greatest Hungarian actress had just committed suicide, along with her husband, a famous surgeon. The other occupants of the house, not having seen them for two days, had forced their front door and discovered the two corpses. A hypodermic syringe and some empty phials lay on the carpet at the foot of the bed. The couple had not waited for the lorry and the blue ticket . . .

While Baby was dressing to go to the Lyric Theatre, she remembered her first meeting with the actress. As she was making up her face before the looking-glass, the suicide's features appeared in it instead of her own. She saw two great brown eyes that tilted up slightly at the corners; a velvety glance; a face alight with inner fire; a skin like alabaster; a tall, slender body. As she retouched the outlines of her mouth, Baby felt as if she were painting the dead woman's lips for the evening performance. The death of the famous actress had affected her more deeply than the mass deportations that had been going on for weeks.

Baby studied her features minutely in the glass. Yes, she was really lovely to-night . . . the warm bath had revived all the transparency of her skin and her slender hands had a flawless, patrician whiteness. They had certainly never been coarsened by manual work.

One day as she put her lily-white arm round Törzs's neck, she had asked him:

" Don't you prefer a velvety skin that smells nice to dirty nails and untidy hair and woollen stockings and flat-heeled shoes and a scarf tied round the head? "

" Communism doesn't consider woman as a lure to the senses," Törzs had replied. " It considers her as a working companion who, at the same time, completes the male—someone who's never known velvet doesn't weep over not having any . . . The Russian woman works on equal terms with the man in the factory and the field and the office, even in the army. She is proud to build the socialist world side by side with him."

" But," Baby had objected, " if, so to speak, there's no difference left between the sexes, don't men feel as if they were falling in love with other men? "

Törzs had his answer ready.

" In the West, they make everything a question of sex. Bolshevism destroys this decadent perversity. One no longer attaches so much importance to one's body. The Party takes care of the new generation that has been brought up as bolshevists. Young people are no longer influenced by foolish and harmful memories. Bolshevism is the most human way of life there is. Everyone works in common for the security and happiness of the humanity of the future, for world communism . . ."

" *I* don't work for the good of humanity," thought Baby, as she remembered this conversation. She studied her reflection in the glass: her black dress was a perfect foil to the gold of her hair. She fastened a string of pearls round her neck and called out to her mother-in-law:

" I'm ready, Mamma. We can go whenever you want to."

The old woman retorted sharply:

" I've been ready for ages, my girl."

She detested her daughter-in-law more than ever. The thought that she, his mother, was not the only one to share her son's honours was intolerable to her.

The Opera House was packed. Baby sat in the third row, beside her mother-in-law. The two women did not speak to each other.

Red draperies hid the old gilding that adorned the boxes. Only a fifth of the electric bulbs in the huge Venetian glass chandelier were lit. This was the result of the social campaign for economy.

The audience was dim and colourless. From the balconies, it looked as if the stalls were covered with a cloud of greyish dust. On the stage, in front of the great red curtain, a man in dungarees was adjusting the microphone. He blew his nose and disappeared into the wings.

Four individuals entered the stage box on the left of the stalls. Someone began to clap vigorously and was half-heartedly followed by the audience. The applause very soon died down as if overcome by a morbid lassitude.

Slowly the front of the house lights were extinguished. A limelight threw its harsh beam on a young man in a dark suit and a red tie who had appeared in front of the curtain. He gave a brief sketch of the evening's proceedings. Everyone listened apathetically to his words, which were delivered in a rapid monotone. The significance of this evening and this symphony had already been explained to this same audience who had been assembled for this very reason a few days earlier—it was mainly composed of workers to whom the cultural committees of the factories had distributed free tickets. The man in the red tie disappeared behind the curtain, making way for a tall actress with dark hair.

Baby leant towards her mother-in-law.

"I'm sure that woman's going to recite."

Drawing the microphone towards her, the dark-haired woman seemed to be reprimanding the audience as she announced the title of the poem:

Comrade, what have you done to deserve liberty?

Baby sighed and lay back in her seat; she knew at once that it would be long and boring. Distorted by the microphone, the woman's voice had a metallic resonance. Everything passed in procession: tractors, factory chimneys, Stakhanovites, socialist self-respect, red flags floating in the wind, raised fists and bour-

geois corruption. It beat on the brain, harsh as a shower of hailstones.

Baby suddenly opened her eyes; she was afraid someone might have noticed she had been escaping by closing them.

On the stage, the woman clutched the microphone; her voice clanged out like a hammer on an anvil as she launched her last "World Liberty" before she stopped declaiming and made a mechanical bow. She disappeared before the applause broke out because she did not want to steal the laurels of the poet whose thoughts she had done no more than transmit.

The curtain rose on a perfect stage setting. In the centre front stood the conductor's rostrum and desk. Around him, in a semi-circle, were the instrumentalists, soberly arrayed in black. A pale, red-haired woman leant gracefully against her harp. The choir was arranged in tiers behind the orchestra; the children in front, then the women, and at the back, the men. At the back of the stage hung three gigantic portraits: Lenin, Karl Marx and Stalin. One of the violinists was putting the last touches to his bow, but, at a nudge from his neighbour, he hastily laid down his rosin.

Janos strode on to the stage: he seemed nervous. There were a few uncertain claps. Before his mother had had time to add hers, Janos tapped his desk. The choir fixed its eyes on him, riveted in attention. This sustained stare looked oddly like the stiff grimace that people made when they were trying to repress a yawn. The pianist rubbed his hands together and dried them with his handkerchief. Janos raised his baton and gave the signal.

The first movement was in the nature of an exposition. The programme notes explained that this introduction described the sufferings of the people before the liberation.

As if released by the conductor, the music burst out like a turbulent river. An undercurrent of profound sadness sounded in the muffled voices of the basses. Reinforced by the male voices, the heavy, bitter theme was carried on by the 'cellos.

Then the tenor's voice rose, solitary and unaccompanied:

Let me speak to you, my eight million brothers,
(O Comrades hear my voice!)
Ship of mine, turn your prow to the current . . .
And let undying memory
Sweep back across the seas of time . . .

Land of my fathers, where for a thousand years:
The rivers have overflowed with the blood of our people,
Never forget, oh never, never
It was the capitalists who bled us white . . .

And now the women's voices took up the theme:

We cursed the unborn children in our wombs
Knowing these children would be born enslaved
Serfs and chattels of the capitalists.

The woodwind lamented hysterically. The tone took on a steely sharpness, like the glitter of a swordblade; it rent and shattered the nerves of the audience. The public was electrified out of its apathy. People leant forward to listen, as if something extraordinary were happening before their eyes. The piano took up the theme in its turn and seemed to be disputing the revelation of the work's secret with the violins. The harp shuddered; its glissandos suggested the apparition of ghosts. The principal theme was everywhere, crouching behind each player like a white spectre. An obstinate xylophone demanded to be heard, arguing impatiently with the 'cellos. Then the conductor's baton switched off the current of the music; making a momentary short-circuit, an instant of silence between the first two movements.

The subject of the second movement was the liberation. At a signal from Janos, the trumpets blared out their song of triumph, accompanied by the men's choir.

Dear Comrades: partisans, victorious armies
You came and conquered and delivered us
From the cruel capitalist yoke . . .

Then came the women's turn:

Now at last we are free to work in factories
Never again shall we be parasites
The unmarried mother's face shall shine with glory
Bringing forth a warrior to fight the noble fight
The great defensive battle for the freedom of the world.

And finally, the crystal clear voices of the children rang out:

Oh the joy, the joy of being born
Into a land where the people are rulers
We sing the joy of the newborn of the future
We are the pioneers, ready if need be
To shed our blood gladly as brave partisans.

Stridently, the violins took up the melodic theme once more; their strings gave it a sharp, piercing urgency. The choir waited, motionless. And then, slowly, in a largo that grew and swelled like a rising flood, the music expanded and filled the theatre, while the oboes, pianissimo, recalled the sorrowful theme of the exposition. The bass drum's heavy, muffled thunder underlined the intense despair expressed by the 'cellos.

Baby sat with closed eyes. Her body was vibrating under the impact of a rush of thoughts and feelings. The dynamic power of the symphony moved her whole being to the depths. Through her wet eyelids, she watched the conductor. His head gleamed in the shafts of limelight as his powerful gestures raised and controlled the tremendous living forces he seemed to be drawing out of each separate instrument.

"What magnificent talent," she thought, as she let herself be carried away by the music as if she were being floated down a moonlit stream in a magic bark woven out of the rippling harps. And it seemed to her, that, having dipped her hand in this flood of sound the music ran in bright drops off her fingers and that a phrase from the solo violins lay, for a moment, in the hollow of her palm, as in a chalice.

"I loved Janos once," she thought, with a stab in her heart. "Yes, I loved him in spite of everything . . . And this was what I admired in him—the creative artist."

The second movement of the symphony evoked the profound, mourning grief of a Requiem Mass. The dark undercurrent of the orchestra was like a black sea from which rose the wild lament of the human voices. The audience, hypnotised, became visionaries, possessed by a living anguish that blotted out all other consciousness. Insensible to the contradictions between the music and the words, they saw the stage transformed into a vast theatre of death in which they were at once the corpse and the spectators. The vibration of the harps was like a faint, far-away breeze that set the flames of invisible candles flickering.

Baby could hardly keep back her tears, tears that washed and purified her heart. She could not feel her hands pressed together as if in a convulsive spasm. It was the first time in her life that she had lost all consciousness of her body. It had become weightless and impalpable compared to the soul that was thrusting so urgently into life.

She returned to normal consciousness as soon as the orchestra stopped. It was the break between the second and third movement of the symphony. She did not notice that there were now only three men in the stage box; the fourth had disappeared.

The third movement was rapid. It carried the audience away with its passion like a whirlwind sucking up and sweeping away dead leaves. A mysterious, burning sorrow pulsed in its rhythm. The man beating the bass drum was transformed into a little black demon bringing news from the world of darkness. The trumpets rent open the earth that masked the communal graves. The vision was so intense that it veiled the portraits of Marx and Lenin and Stalin from the eyes of the listeners. After a final, powerful crescendo, the musicians' arms suddenly stopped dead, as if petrified. The next moment, Janos had turned towards the audience and was bowing, as if awaiting his verdict.

For an instant, the audience too remained paralysed. Then the

applause broke out, vehement and spontaneous. Janos pointed to the orchestra. The players stood up. The applause went on endlessly; hands went on tirelessly clapping; people stamped their feet and gave curtain call after curtain call. The whole theatre shook with delirious triumph, as if with the tremor of a distant earthquake.

Baby clapped, smiling through her tears. She would have liked to have rushed up on to the stage and kissed Janos's hand. Törzs had become as remote in her mind as if he had never been born.

The musicians left the stage, but the public went on manifesting its enthusiasm. Janos confronted the audience, mortally tired but profoundly happy. He was no longer bowing. He simply stood there, smiling and savouring his triumph.

29

It was a very long time since Janos and his family had slept like that for a whole night. For once it was Baby who woke up first and got up to make the coffee, her heart still swelling with enthusiasm. She hummed, as she laid the table for breakfast, then she carefully removed the night cream from her face so that Janos should find her looking fresh and young.

"Perhaps I love him again," she thought, happy and a little surprised. "I didn't know he was such a great man." Her humming turned into a little song: "I adore genius, I adore genius," as she put the bread-basket on the table. Noticing a stain on the front of her dressing-gown, she hurried back to her room and dressed as carefully, at ten o'clock in the morning, as if she were dressing to go out for the evening. She put on a dark blue wool dress and smoothed her golden hair into big, flat curls. Somewhere, among the thoughts she dared not even admit to herself, was the idea that Janos's career was assured now, that he would make a great deal of money and travel abroad. That being the case, it was important that he should love her as much as he had done twelve years ago.

Janos got up in his turn and came into the dining-room. He exclaimed:

"What, are you dressed already?" his voice was faintly reproachful. "Why are you dressed?"

This remark was enough to ruin Baby's good humour. But she clutched on mentally to her angelic early morning mood and answered gaily:

"It's in your honour I've got myself up . . . Such a great

genius is allowed to have his breakfast in his dressing-gown, but his slaves ought to be properly dressed to receive him . . ."

The mother entered at this precise moment. Her ears just caught the last words. Promptly, she bristled up.

" What's happening, son? Is Baby criticising me because I'm not dressed? "

Janos was still under the spell of his wife's flattering words.

" No, of course not, Mamma," he reassured her. " You've got it all wrong. Anyway, don't let's start quarrelling. What do you two think . . . was last night a real success? "

The old woman suddenly became as serious as if she had been called on to pronounce sentence of life or death.

" It was a tremendous success. You are a great man. A very great composer. If only your father could have heard you last night . . ."

Baby listened, a little depressed. She had omitted to put on her spectacles so as to look prettier and her eyes, already tired, were beginning to give her a headache. She looked at her husband and tried to see in him again the magician who had steeped her soul in enchantment. " Yet they're both one and the same man," she reminded herself. " One and the same man . . ."

His mother followed Janos about like a shadow wherever he went. As she moved about the flat beside him, she would stop at intervals and tenderly slip his arm under hers. When he sat down, she leant over the back of his chair, gazing down at him with fond, brooding eyes. It was as if she were out to proclaim in front of Baby that this genius was well and truly her son and no one else's and that, in comparison to her, Baby counted for nothing.

During the afternoon, many members of the Opera company came to congratulate the Dorogis.

Klein was beside himself with enthusiasm.

" Maestro, it was marvellous—tremendous. Nothing like it has ever been heard."

About six, when everyone had gone, Janos said, with a smile:

" At this moment, they'll be just finishing correcting the proofs

of the notices of last night's performance. To-morrow, the papers will be full of the musical event."

The triumph of his work had touched him so intimately that a kind of modesty prevented him from uttering the name of the *Symphony of Joy*.

"You will take me to Moscow with you, won't you?" Baby said during dinner. "One can buy gorgeous furs in Russia—it's the land of furs . . ."

This was too much for her mother-in-law.

"You don't need furs, my girl. Your fur coat's still perfectly wearable . . ." Then she remembered that circumstances had changed and a new role was now imposed on her. In a flash, she transformed herself into a great lady and said to her son:

"In the old days, your father always brought me back presents whenever he had to go away. One day he brought me back a lace fan from Vienna."

"There aren't any lace fans in Moscow," Janos said gently.

The old woman sat bolt upright on the edge of her chair, sure of having the last word.

"*I* want an ikon," she declared, with a triumphant glance at Baby. "An ikon, not furs . . ."

Janos suddenly gave a start.

"All the same, it's odd that Imre hasn't been round to congratulate me yet . . ."

His mother's lips curled in a contemptuous smile.

Baby smiled too, but her smile was sweet.

"Törzs," she said softly, "it's true, I'd entirely forgotten him."

She lit a cigarette. Her gaze encountered that of her husband. For a long moment they looked deep into each other's eyes.

The next day, all three of them bent silently over the music column of the Party's official newspaper. Their silence was so intense one could have heard a fly brushing its wings.

The writer of the article began his article with a question.

"Is it desirable that an artist should display his own personal problems before the great public, and, having found no other way

out, should parade his own confusion? I might also ask: is it right that a work with political implications should be presented to a large audience without having been previously submitted to a hearing by the Arts Council?

We are bound to state that all three movements of Dorogi's *Symphony of Joy* terminate in the expression of a profound depression, a kind of despair. We observe with regret that Dorogi depicts problems that have not yet been solved as definitely insoluble and that, instead of finding in the tragedy of things a purifying force that incites to action, he draws nothing from it but a black pessimism.

"In the past, there were numbers of composers who clearly saw the strength of the people and the justice of their cause, but they did not dare to believe that one day the people would take its destiny into its own hands. These writers and composers saw capitalism and imperialism strangling the throats of the workers but, in their words, they invested these deadly forces with occult powers instead of stigmatising them and encouraging the people's revolution and announcing their inevitable annihilation. It is those cowardly authors, working with feeble tools and flourishing in the mire of formalism, of whom Dorogi's work reminds me—a work which, at the most, merely reflects his technical knowledge."

There was nothing to be heard but their flurried breathing as Janos and the two women opened the second newspaper.

"In my opinion," wrote the other critic, "not one of the three movements of Dorogi's work, lightly entitled *Symphony of Joy*, corresponds effectively with its assigned aim. It manifests neither the ideal nor the dialectic which the composer should have had in view. It must be observed that the title in no way corresponds to the content of the work. This fact is intolerable from the point of view of Marxist æsthetics. The music of Dorogi is paradoxically opposed to what was his mission to convey. Alas, from this we must infer many things concerning the author's lack of political understanding."

"Is it good or bad?" asked the mother uncertainly. "I don't understand a word any more."

Janos was as pale as a corpse.

"It's complete political ruin," he muttered darkly.

His mother wanted to say something, but Baby signed to her to keep silent.

"For once in your life, do keep quiet."

The third critic was more concise.

"Dorogi has not renounced his former mentality by changing his name. Listening last night to the *Symphony of Joy*, we felt the nefarious influence of the Nazi proclivities of Jenö Tasnady, the traitor who incurred his just punishment not long ago. We have quite enough young, progressive talent not to need to worry about the elucubrations of fascist ghosts. The music of such men as Dorogi instils poison into the ears of the people."

"I'm feeling ill," Janos said faintly.

He returned to his room and shut the door behind him.

30

Dear Papa and Mamma,

There is no point in my returning home. We shall only quarrel, so it's not worth it. I am very fond of you but I see clearly that you have great defects. Our house is a cul-de-sac so there is no way of escaping from it. You blame the present and worship the past. I know practically nothing of the past and what little I do know, I am trying to forget. I have found my place in the bosom of constructive socialism. I shall be an educator of the people and work for the happiness of future generations. I have discovered all this for myself; what I am telling you is not propaganda, but the truth. I am grateful to the teachers at the seminary who have helped me to recognise the danger you represent to the spirit of progress.

They have succeeded in purging the towns of the pensioners who foment trouble and the old people who spread bad news and pray for war. They are putting young people in their place—I am one of them. Don't worry about me: the State will look after me. I see a lot of Pista but we are not going to get married. It's only the interests of the community that count, not those of private individuals. I repeat, don't have any fears on my account: I won't catch cold: I'll look after myself. I'll write to you from time to time. I hope Papa doesn't still have such bad headaches. Kiss Ida for me. How is she? Tell her she can have my wool dress and my scarf with the yellow spots. She's always liked them.

Dear parents, I'm grown-up now and no longer a child. I shall fight with all my might for peace . . . if necessary, with arms.

I kiss your hands affectionately.

Theresa.

It was an icy February day, yet Sandor had already been walking for hours. He had left the house immediately after breakfast, wanting to be alone with Theresa's letter so that he could weigh up every word and foretell the destiny that was already inscribed in each sentence. The snow crackled under his feet. Now and then he would stop, pull the letter out of his pocket and read a sentence over again. The little girl with the long, rippling hair who had so loved putting flowers on the altar had become as far-away as if she were writing from another planet or from a ship sailing on unknown seas.

Without even noticing it, Sandor had made his way towards the burnt and looted Casino. Suddenly he found himself face to face with its blackened ruins, half covered by the still-falling snow. Turning round, Sandor noticed that the big white flakes blotted out his footsteps almost immediately. This disturbed him; it seemed to him that, for some unknown reason, a giant hand had been pushing him towards the ruined building. Once again, he reread the letter. " Our house is a cul-de-sac, so there is no way of escaping from it." But, seeing that the snow was blurring the ink, he put the page back in his overcoat pocket. He remembered that walk at night before the St. Anna ball; he could still hear Theresa's voice and her silvery laugh as she cried:

" Look, Father, we've got a shadow in the moonlight . . .! " Those words were so distinct that he turned round sharply. There was no one there; only a black crow that flew off, croaking. It was almost at a run that the notary returned to the village. The pace had made him hot: the snowflakes that clung to his face began to melt. He stopped in front of the house; the walls he had known ever since he could remember seemed charged with hostility. Anna loved this house so much and had so well adapted it to her tastes that Sandor felt as if he were not returning to his own home but seeking refuge in a stranger's. Feeling as if he had lost his bearings, he stood for a while in front of the porch. Then, suddenly, he started. It seemed to him that the air was still saturated with the scent of petunias, in spite of all this snow . . . He retraced his

steps and walked in the direction of the station with the rapid steps of a man who knows exactly where he is going. Twilight was slowly falling round him. When he reached the little station, it was empty. There was not even a solitary soul in the waiting-room; the last train of the day had come and gone. He walked towards the lake. Someone he did not recognise passed him on the main road and said good-evening to him. Sometimes he slipped his hand into his pocket to make sure the letter was still there. The last message . . .

He halted on the bank. The greyish, frozen water stretched as far as the eye could see. Behind the curtain of snow, he could imagine the blue, sunlit shore of Badacsony . . . Vintagers were singing. When had they gathered those grapes? He had a sudden homesick longing for the little house hidden among the vines. That, at least, was really his: Anna had never liked it. Sandor began to daydream. Two days in the little house would be enough to cure him, to give him back his peace of mind. He would light the tiny stove, then it would be nice and warm . . . There was an oil-lamp on the table and plenty of blankets on the narrow camp bed. There, in that solitude, he would succeed in solving Ida's problem. He would think out what steps to take to get over the difficulties of the moment. There he might even come to understand Theresa. He began to make his way across the ice. " My God," he thought humbly, " I thank you for existing. For accompanying me through life. For allowing me to speak to you. Your power is infinite and I know that you see all my misery."

He walked on, over the ice. He could no longer see the shore he had left nor the one towards which he was going. Tears of repentance ran down his cheeks, along with the melted snow.

Suddenly the ice became as elastic as a carpet of moss. He stood still, stupefied. At his feet, the surface of the lake had taken on a menacing black hue. Sandor half turned round, but he no longer knew which way he had come. The thickening snow and the thickening darkness imprisoned him in a muffling, milky haze. He was frightened. " No, I don't want to die, I don't want to die,"

he cried out despairingly. "Help! Help! . . ." The ice gave way under his weight. Up to the waist in the freezing water, he sighed out one ardent prayer: "Take care of Ida, take care of Ida . . ."

31

THEY RANG the Dorogis' door-bell about three in the morning to bring them the deportation notice. Holding the blue ticket in his hands and shaking all over with fear, Janos explained to the policeman that there must be some mistake. But the man disappeared without seeming to have heard a word he said.

Awakened by the noise, Baby and his mother came out into the hall, too, their eyes still puffy with sleep.

The blue ticket informed them they must leave the flat within eight hours; that is, before eleven o'clock. They could take a hundred and ten pounds of luggage apiece.

"Jesus, Mary," wailed the old woman. "Jesus, Mary . . ."

Baby was trembling in every limb; she was cold all over. Janos's face was as pale as a death mask.

"Now I see what's happened," he said. "This ticket is obviously meant for the people who used to live here and who've run off to Austria . . ."

"Are you sure of that?" asked his mother.

Janos made an impatient gesture.

"The only thing one's sure of is death. But it's probably the explanation. It must be."

Baby huddled up in one of Jenö's arm-chairs.

"This régime isn't in the habit of making mistakes."

The two others turned on her angrily.

"Hold your tongue, can't you?" bellowed Janos.

"You're trying to frighten me, out of pure spite," his mother added to back him up. She went over to the cupboard and, after

much groping under the piles of linen, brought out her little bag of jewels.

"What shall I do with the gold?" she asked, a trifle less anxiously.

"Tie it round your neck."

Baby could not help thinking of the stolen length of chain and of her dress. The mother was thinking of it too. Never had the two women hated each other so much.

"And now what's going to happen, my son?" asked the old woman, bursting into tears. "What's going to happen . . .?"

"Baby will go and see Törzs as soon as possible at the National Security and fix the whole business."

The young woman shivered.

"You'll come with me, won't you?"

"No. You'll go alone."

A little later, Baby went back to bed, still wearing her dressing-gown. The other two also went back to bed.

The old woman called out to Janos from her room:

"Don't you think we ought to pack?"

"Don't be silly, Mamma. Don't you realise there's simply been some muddle?"

"But you said yourself that your symphony had ruined you politically—isn't that why they've got a grudge against you?"

Janos did not answer. All three of them waited for the morning without turning off the light.

In her bedroom, Baby pressed her face against the pillow as if it was Törzs's body. For the first time, she called him Imre in her own mind. "What luck that at least there's my Imre to save us . . ."

About half past eight, she presented herself at the Ministry of National Security. She looked extremely elegant. Under the little black hat, her golden curls framed her face as perfectly as if she had just come from the hairdresser's. After a long interrogation, they took away her identity card and then telephoned through to Imre Törzs. Baby smoked impatiently and glanced at her watch. It was a quarter to ten. At last she was taken to Törzs's office. When the

door had closed behind her, Baby literally flung herself into the police officer's arms.

" Imre, my darling, look what they brought us during the night. It must be a stupid mistake."

The man pushed her away gently, offered her a chair and sat down again at his desk. Baby handed him the blue ticket.

" Why can't I sit beside you? " she asked. " It's so horribly official seeing you on the other side of the desk like that . . ."

He kept his eyes lowered on the blue ticket.

Baby leant forward.

" Darling, I can't see how they could have made such an idiotic mistake."

Her scent drifted towards the police officer. He threw himself back in his chair as if to escape it.

" It's not a mistake," he muttered, raising his eyes and looking at Baby for the first time. Her face had gone pale under the pink powder.

Törzs went on:

" I managed to arrange that you should get the ticket earlier so as to have more time to get ready. You've been given eight hours instead of one and you can take a hundred pounds of luggage instead of ten . . . It's a great concession."

Baby's bag slipped from her hands and fell to the floor.

" You mean that really and truly . . ."

She leapt to her feet, ran to the young man and clasped him by the shoulders.

" Imre—look at me. It's me, Baby, whom you love . . . who belongs to you . . . Be yourself again."

Törzs took the hands that were clutching him and stood up:

" Don't make a scene . . . it won't do any good . . ."

The tears running down Baby's cheeks made two furrows in the powder.

" Imre, would you stand by and see me killed? "

The police officer turned away from her. He walked over to the window and stared out into the street.

"Deportation to the country is uncomfortable but it doesn't kill one."

After a slight pause he went on:

"I thought for a very long time that it was worth the trouble to spare you. Your husband has talent and the Party is generous. I have here, in this very room, his whole political dossier. One notable item in it is a diary in which Jenö Tasnady noted hour by hour the name of his visitors and the events of the day. On the 16th of July, 1944, your husband went to see him at eleven o'clock in the morning to ask him to nominate him as Director of the National Opera . . . In spite of this fact, the Party has been tolerant towards your husband because it hoped he had re-educated himself. They went on hoping this until the eve of the Feast of Fir-trees, that is to say until the moment when his *Symphony* revealed that he had kept all his decadent and morbid ideology, all the nostalgic pessimism of an era that has vanished for ever. From that moment, there was no question of delaying the blue ticket any longer. The Party decided on the night of the concert that he must be deported."

Baby was standing close beside Törzs.

"But what about me?" she said, very low. "*I've* never had anything to do with politics. I'm a woman, I've given myself to you . . ."

"It wasn't out of heroism you became my mistress," he said. "You liked going to bed with me . . ."

Baby blushed to the roots of her hair.

Törzs remained impenetrable. He kept his eyes riveted on the window pane.

"Even if I loved you," he said at last, "I would not sacrifice either my whole life's work or the Party to you. You're not worth making sacrifices for. You're a superfluous creature. Utterly superfluous."

He glanced at his watch.

"It's five to ten. Go and get your most necessary things together. You'd better take your warmest clothes, not your most elegant ones."

Baby did not hear these last words. She had already left the room.

Törzs stared at the street. He had just lived through the hardest moment of his life. He had very nearly weakened. He caught sight of Baby in the street. His gaze followed the young woman's figure as she ran wildly, her unbuttoned coat streaming out behind her.

Turning away his head, he sat down at his desk. He sat there for a long time, without moving, lost in his thoughts.

* * *

Panting for breath, Baby burst into the dining-room like a whirlwind.

"Quick, quick . . . hurry up! . . . They're taking us away. It's quarter past ten!"

"What?" exclaimed Janos. "What's that you're saying?"

Baby suddenly became infinitely humble and frail.

"Törzs won't fix things," she moaned. "He refuses. They've got Jenö's note-book. And they decided to deport you immediately after the performance."

Janos bore down on her, threatening.

"You filthy little bitch, so you didn't know how to keep your lover? He's chucked you out. Don't you think I've known everything right from the first? You took me for an idiot, you made a fool of me and I stood by and put up with everything."

The mother screamed.

"You'll see . . . Baby won't be deported, only us two. She wants to get us killed. What am I to put on? What am I to pack? Oh, my heart . . . I'm suffocating . . ."

Baby stood in a corner, trembling all over. Her arms were crossed over her breast as if she could hide behind that fragile rampart.

Janos gripped her brutally by the shoulder.

"Pack, you bitch, pack! And hurry up about it . . ."

Soon the contents of cupboards were strewn all over the floor.

The mother heaped up provisions in a sheet and knotted its four corners. They picked out their warmest clothes.

"I'll never be able to lift a hundred pounds," groaned the mother.

"Baby will carry the suitcase," replied Janos.

The whole flat had been transformed into a battlefield. They picked up completely useless things and dropped them again anywhere. Baby collected the same clothes she had worn in the cellar during the siege. But she could not find her flat-heeled shoes.

"I must have thrown them away," she thought in despair.

The shrill peal of the door-bell went through them like an electric shock. Janos's gaze swept round the flat for the last time. Then it came to rest on his wife. Besides the suitcase she was carrying, she was clutching a little box under her armpit—a box containing all her beauty preparations.

He snatched the little box away from her and flung it in a corner. The lipsticks rolled all over the floor; the pink powder spilt on the carpet; the blue eye-shadow lodged in a crack in the parquet.

"Out there, you won't need all that stuff," he shouted, green with rage.

He threw a parcel of blankets so roughly on his wife's shoulder that she nearly fell. She staggered and big tears spurted out of her eyes. She knelt down to pick up a lipstick but Janos gave a kick and sent the little silver tube flying.

"Go and open the door. Yes, *you!* Go and receive your friends, you Party strumpet!"

The bell went on pealing remorselessly. Baby opened the door; her head was swimming. Some men entered the hall. Were there two of them or a hundred? She could hardly see them. Someone took her by the arm.

"Whatever you do, don't start making trouble," said a voice. "In your own interest, follow us without any fuss."

The passers-by turned away their heads in the street at the sight of the lorry that meant public disgrace. The old woman had to be

lifted up to get her in at the back. Then the tarpaulin was pulled down again, and, sitting on the floor of the lorry, they set off for the unknown. They were dressed just as they had been on the day after the Liberation.

"My lipstick," said Baby. And, suddenly, her frayed nerves gave way and she began to vomit.

32

They were standing on the edge of the lake, dressed in black; Anna, Ida and Theresa. Theresa had returned as soon as she heard of her father's death. She had come home for two days so as to be present at the funeral. It was there she had learned that there would be no ceremony at her father's grave for that grave was this huge frozen lake. The three of them stood there motionless on the bank, gazing at the ice which showed no trace of a crack. The grey surface stretched monotonously as far as the eye could reach, melting indistinguishably into the winter sky on the horizon.

"Mother," said Ida, in a hollow voice. "I can tell you now because you're not rivals any more, you two. I've always loved Papa ever so much more than I did *you*."

Anna stared at the lake without reply. She was utterly broken. Twenty-four hours before Sandor's disappearance, the assistant notary had warned her that she would have to give up the whole place to the new notary and his family. The house . . . her whole life.

Anna turned her eyes on her elder daughter.

"Your father was a fine man," she said gently. "He deserved your love."

From that moment, Anna knew she would never reveal to Ida the secret of her birth that had tortured Sandor so cruelly.

Theresa did not breathe a word. The wind across the lake ruffled her cropped hair.

Ida slipped her arm under her mother's.

"I ought to have told him about the child when I told you."

Theresa shuddered.

"Do you think he wouldn't have committed suicide then?"

Ida turned sharply to her sister.

"Papa didn't commit suicide. He died."

Theresa thrust her hands in her pockets and moved a few steps away.

They all wanted to go, but something impacably kept them standing there by that vast coffin.

"And now, what's going to happen?" asked Anna.

Ida looked at her.

"I shall wait?"

"Wait for what?"

"Perhaps there'll be a solution. The child will be born . . . After all, it's quite possible that Marton is still alive and that he'll come back. God is keeping us waiting. He has left us alone for so long—as if He had forgotten us. But one day, perhaps, He will find us again."

"Do you believe that?" murmured Anna.

Ida said nothing, only bent her head in assent. And they went on staring at the ice.

33

STANDING IN front of the window, Baby looked out into the yard. The sun of the first March days had melted the snow on the dung-heap; the liquid manure trickled in long runnels over the lumps of mud.

It was the second month they had been living in the little mud-floored room at the back of the farm. The lorry had deposited them, along with their companions in misfortune, at the administrative centre of the tiny hamlet embedded in the slime of the great *puszta*. There they had been divided up and sent to their various destinations. The State had requisitioned rooms in the houses of peasants who had not yet joined the collective farms.

When Baby saw the tall, bony peasant woman for the first time, she nearly burst into tears. Perched on her high heels and wearing her long trousers, she stood waiting in silence under that cold, hostile stare. The woman looked them up and down, then indicated the inner room with a curt nod. They went into it and shut the door behind them.

There were two narrow beds pushed up against the walls. Janos's mother limped up to them to feel them.

"Straw palliasses," she muttered, promptly choosing the bed that seemed to her the better of the two. Baby and her husband would have to share the other.

They put their luggage down on the mud floor. Their breath, condensed by the cold, hung round them as if the words of hatred they spat at each other had turned into icy vapour. In the corner stood a rickety little stove.

"Make a fire," moaned the mother as, utterly worn out, she threw herself on the bed and wrapped herself in the blankets.

"Make a fire," Janos commanded Baby. She stood there, rooted to the spot, paralysed with cold.

"Do you hear me Go on, find some wood and light a fire. Mamma's cold . . ."

Baby went out and asked the peasant woman where she could find some fuel.

"In the wood," said the woman, with complete lack of interest. "You can pick up dead branches there."

That was how it all began.

Day after day, Baby brought in faggots and went to draw water, clutching the pulley of the well with her frozen fingers and struggling with the weight of the full pail. The family did all cooking in their own room. About eleven in the morning, they went out and made a few purchases; they still had some money with which to pay for them. Baby lived without thinking. When Janos and his mother spoke to her, she looked at them with eyes so completely devoid of expression that they soon stopped speaking to her at all.

Baby waged war against dirt. She washed herself in front of her mother-in-law in a tiny pail and she had to empty the tin the old woman used at night as a chamber-pot on to the dung-heap. The chalky well-water dried up the skin of her face and it became more and more chapped. Her cracked lips had lost even the faintest touch of red. Baby had no glass in which to see to do her hair in the morning. She could have bought herself a little pocket mirror at the village grocery but Janos would not give her money for that and she had not a farthing of her own. Her mother-in-law did nothing but eat, scraping up the very last crumbs.

During the first month, the mother and son talked unceasingly. Their words, heavy with meaning, kept up like continuous bombardment from morning till night. The same themes recurred over and over again: Törzs, *Symphony of Joy*, death, Siberia,

torture, apprehension. That was all Baby heard, over and over again, in the same monotonous intonation.

In the second month, they all began to develop the same habits. They woke up at the same time, were hungry at the same time, relieved themselves at the same time. Janos went to the shop and bought a little coal which he brought back in a basket. Words became as superfluous as glancing at the watch. In the end, they ceased to glance at it at all. What was the point?

One night, Baby stole a coin from Janos. With it, she bought a postcard and sent it to Klein. She gave him their address.

She did not hope to get a reply for she knew it was highly dangerous for him to correspond with people who had been deported.

But Klein did write; moreover he told them he would send them a food parcel.

"The only person we can count on," said Baby, in a low voice.

"I always offered him something to eat whenever he came to see us," said the old woman vivaciously. "Poor dear Arpad, he's very fond of me!"

Baby turned away her head and stared once more at the dung-heap. There was nothing else to look at.

Wherever she went, even every time she came into the room, her mother-in-law's eyes were always on her.

One day Baby could stand it no longer.

"What are you always staring at?" she asked. Her voice was so faint that the words had to be guessed, rather than heard.

The old woman gave a malicious smile.

"Your hair," she jeered. "Your hair's growing . . . and it's black at the roots!"

Baby's hand shot up to her head as swiftly as if her hair had caught fire. She rushed to the cupboard, took out a little scarf she had kept, and tied it round her head.

It was only then, after two long months that they suddenly realised that they still had hope. Who knew, one of these days, they might perhaps return to Budapest Perhaps Arpad might manage

to do something for them. Perhaps they would be pardoned some day . . . perhaps fate would take pity on them. . . .

* * *

And so the tiny room with the mud floor became a vast waiting-room. A waiting-room at dawn, where people doze on wooden benches, having hoped from all eternity that some day at rain would come. They waited for it so fervently that they did not notice that, on the track outside, the grass had grown high over the rusted rails.

THE END

BOROUGH OF
RAWTENSTALL
PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Those Who Wait was orginally published in France by Librairie Gallimard under the title *Dieu est en retard.*

THE AUTHOR

CHRISTINE ARNOTHY was born in Budapest in 1930 of a family with a long scholastic tradition. Her father was a professor at Budapest University. Her parents were determined that Christine should be a concert pianist. She was equally determined to be a writer.

During the Russian siege of German-held Budapest in 1945 Christine and some other civilians were trapped in a cellar for months on end. Throughout this time she kept a diary of experiences that took courage to record. This diary was to become the basis of her first book. After the siege she lived for a time in the country, and in 1947 returned to Budapest to finish her schooling. She escaped from Hungary in the same year and had her diary published in Hungarian in Munich. She married, moved to Paris and then Brussels, taking a variety of jobs and writing before going to work.

The diary, which she herself translated into French, won the Prix Verité; translated into English as *I am Fifteen and I do not Want to Die*, it was generally acclaimed. *Those Who Wait* is Mme. Arnothy's second book.

She now lives in Paris with her parents and six-year-old daughter.

CHRISTINE ARNOTHY

I am fifteen and I do not want to die

"She is one of the few writers capable of describing what it feels like to be an innocent sufferer under Communism. It is well worth reading for its brilliant descriptions of past horrors and present misery. She has told this hideous story with evident honesty and fine reporting skill." *Manchester Guardian*

"Outstanding in the literature of war. It has the abruptness, shadows and tensions of the best films, but superimposed is the knowledge that the cruelty and destruction are true." *The Times*

"A moving book. Heart-rending as well as exciting." *Sunday Times*

"She writes with a simplicity and sincerity that is most moving." *Daily Telegraph*

"Reading this account of the civilian front line one experie[illegible] the timeless quality of a siege. She commands respect and[illegible] the conscience." *The Times Literary Supp[illegible]*

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